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# once and floral

BY SUNNY PARASOL



Like most of the worst things in Shen Qingqiu's life, this problem started with the author of this story.

Every so often, the wife plot remnants from PIDW's lasciviously lengthy serialization would rear their little heads, and this time was no different. For example: wife plot #693, a sudden poisoning of the most beloved flower of Luo Binghe's lovers' bouquet, a necessary *papapa* to expel the toxins, etc., etc. and so on and so forth — it was all routine in a way that Shen Qingqiu was loath to admit to. This time, as the solitary flower in Luo Binghe's much-reduced harem, Shen Qingqiu had bravely endured this latest plot and the heavenly pillar, and had fervently prayed that the last piece of this particular plot would not fall into place.

Much to Shen Qingqiu's displeasure, wife plot #693 was faithfully recreated, down to the last detail of some thirsty little reader's request of several unsavory elements (which Shen Qingqiu had heavily critiqued in his paragraphs of replies in the trenches of that particular chapter's comment section) — all except for one key detail. This resolution, featuring Shen Qingqiu, had been resolved in the little bamboo house on Cang Qiong Peak, where several little disciples (including head disciple Ning Yingying) had been walking past the window that Luo Binghe had sworn up and down he had closed, and perhaps Shen Qingqiu had been, ah, *vocalizing* a little louder than usual, as for the reason of *being poisoned*, but. Well.

And now for completely unrelated reasons, Shen Qingqiu had decided to stay in the demon realm with Luo Binghe for the time being, to let the equilibrium of Cang Qiong Peak return to normal — or however normal a stallion-novel-turned-BL-novel could become. The product of some stupid, hackneyed author's cursed keyboard...

"Shang Qinghua." Shen Qingqiu points his fan at the man at fault, irritated beyond belief. "I'm serious about this! When is it going to stop!"

"I have no idea!" Shang Qinghua yelps. "I wrote PIDW, yeah, but this is all new to me too! Really sorry about the last one bro, I didn't think the System would do you dirty like that —"

"This is not about wife plot #693," Shen Qingqiu says icily. Shang Qinghua lifts an eyebrow; Shen Qingqiu glares at him. "This is about the *frequency*. This is supposed to be between a whole harem's worth of people, not just one man — and why does it have to be me?!"

"To be fair," Shang Qinghua says weakly, wisely avoiding the last question. "There were a couple that weren't as bad? You could totally change the plotline bro, I believe in you —"

Shen Qingqiu glares even more fiercely at him — instead of stopping, though, Shang Qinghua starts talking faster, as if there's a solution just waiting to burst out of him. "Like, uhhh... that one plotline, you know the one, that was pure candy! Enough sugar to give you cavities! I forget, but it was definitely some kind of pastel-colored flower, from the northern mountain caves —"

"Bro. You wrote *thousands* of plot device flowers in this novel, how is anyone supposed to know what 'that one flower plotline' means?"

Shen Qingqiu waves his fan idly as he ponders his next move. In the end, he just can't resist one-upping the author.

"Besides," he says loftily, snapping his fan shut. "The one you're talking about won't work. If it's supposed to fulfill some deep and earnest wish like the original one did, then it's just as likely that I'm going to suffer the same way."

Shang Qinghua's expression turns smug. "Oh, so you do remember —"

With startlingly quick reflexes, he manages to avoid the fan that Shen Qingqiu hurls at him. Probably honed by years of servitude to Mobei-jun, or something.

The flower that Shang Qinghua had mentioned, though — Shen Qingqiu does indeed remember that plotline. It was considered in line with one of Airplane's most overused tropes: a delicate pale flower, only blooming under the crescent sliver of the cold northern winter's thirteenth moon cycle, possessing the unique property of being able to grant one of the recipient's most immediate wishes. It was also physically identical to at least 45 other plot device variants that had interchangeable growing conditions — all with drastically different side effects, of course — and was by far the most boring one of all.

In fact, the little wife that had been gifted said flower hadn't even done anything interesting with it! Her deepest, most urgent wish had been for Luo Binghe to... well. It was a stallion novel; quite self-explanatory. And laughably easy for Peerless Cucumber to tear apart, of course. But the point still stood — it was weak writing! A lazy excuse for feeding the masses! And worst of all: still dooming Shen Qingqiu to yet another Airplane-fueled papaplot!!

Even as Shen Qingqiu explains all this to Shang Qinghua in minute detail, the man has the nerve to shake his head. "No, bro, you're just looking at it the wrong way. I mean, that's just because that was PIDW, you know? As long as *you're* not constantly wanting that kinda stuff, you should be good — I mean, no hard feelings if that's what you really want in life right now…"

"Shang Qinghua..."

"Oh no," Shang Qinghua says, pitching his voice a little louder. "YES, MY KING RIGHT AWAY — Sorry bro, I gotta go, great catching up —!"

Shen Qingqiu opens his mouth to protest, but between one moment and the next, a shadow rift yawns open between them. Shang Qinghua tumbles through it in a flash, and then both he and the rift are gone.

"Coward," Shen Qingqiu mutters under his breath. Why did Shang Qinghua luck out with a demon king that could rescue him from unwanted conversations, while Shen Qingqiu had to deal with all the lowliest dregs of the PIDW plot? It really was unfair.

"Shizun?"

A voice drifts in from the direction of the door, accompanied by a gentle knock, and Shen Qingqiu feels himself perking up. He revises his earlier sentiments: maybe he did have some inane plot remnants to struggle through every now and then, but in the end...

Shen Qingqiu clears his throat, and surreptitiously pats down his robes. "You may enter."

The door slides open, and Luo Binghe makes his way into the room.

Shen Qingqiu clears his throat, silently cursing the fact that his fan is out of reach at the moment. He settles for a gentle smile, folding his hands. "Ah, Binghe. Is there something this master can do for you?"

Luo Binghe shakes his head, his eyes downcast. It reminds Shen Qingqiu of his disciple's white lotus days, ever the demure maiden. "...No, it's nothing. I just wanted to tell you that I have to be away tonight — some urgent matters came up suddenly."

There's a small flare of discontent that Shen Qingqiu quickly stomps down. "Of course. I suppose I don't have to tell you to stay safe?"

A small smile finally reveals itself on Luo Binghe's face as he lifts his head, enough to melt Shen Qingqiu's heart into a puddle. "I'll be safe, Shizun, I promise!"

The night passes uneventfully. When Shen Qingqiu wakes, it's to the other side of the bed as pristine as it was yesterday. The day is spent with Shen Qingqiu wandering alongside Shang Qinghua as his companion, bickering over various upcoming peak lord responsibilities.

Even within the temperature-regulated halls of the palace, it is somehow unbearably hot today — some important demon tribe's request for visiting accommodations, as Shang Qinghua explains. Shen Qingqiu nods along, mentally cursing yet another Airplane plot hiccup to darken his day. It's one thing for it to be a wife plot, but demon politics? Truly abhorrent. And how does it make sense, that Luo Binghe's palace is the one to accommodate others! It should be the other way round, if anything!

Irritated by this plot hole, Shen Qingqiu decides to retire to his quarters early. To his displeasure, it's no cooler there than it is out in public. He briskly fans himself, an attempt to ease the discomfort.

"Shizun," he hears, and turns around to see Luo Binghe in the doorway, like something straight out of the top PIDW search results on L\*\*\*\*r — *like the proper protagonist he is,* Shen Qingqiu thinks in delight. What excellent timing, to be back at the same time!

As Luo Binghe approaches, Shen Qingqiu notes the strain in his expression, as if nervously anticipating something. "Shizun, I'm sorry I'm late. I have something for you."

Shen Qingqiu frowns, opening his mouth to reprimand his disciple, but Luo Binghe unfurls his hands to reveal... Shen Qingqiu blinks.

It's just a flower — plain white, barely longer than the heart line running across Luo Binghe's palm. Shen Qingqiu marvels that the delicate-looking petals are still intact; they look so fragile, as if a gust of wind will bruise them.

Luo Binghe takes another step closer. He smells like the cold, like wintry pine and snow; the urgent business he was attending to must have been off somewhere in the north, near Mobei-jun's territory. His hands are warm as he takes hold of Shen Qingqiu's hand, transfers the delicate little flower to him. "It's — a gift for you, Shizun."

Shen Qingqiu... Okay, he'll admit it. Shen Qingqiu is utterly charmed! How could he not be, to be greeted by his disciple with such a gift! He nods, pleased, and smiles back at Luo Binghe. "Thank you, Binghe."

Luo Binghe doesn't move. Shen Qingqiu watches him as he watches Shen Qingqiu, as if to anticipate... something? Is something supposed to be happening? If there is, Shen Qingqiu is at a total loss. "Is something wrong?"

"Shizun..." Luo Binghe seems at the edge of saying something else, only to change minds halfway through. "Do you have anything you were hoping for today? Any wish that you want fulfilled?"

It takes a moment for Shen Qingqiu to think through that question. There wasn't much, to be honest. Luo Binghe was back from his urgent matter, whatever it had been, and the unbearable heat had subsided as soon as Luo Binghe had returned, so that was no longer an issue. So if he had to wish for anything... Shen Qingqiu's wish would be...

Shen Qingqiu coughs awkwardly.

It's too embarrassing, okay?! Not to mention cheesy, and sickeningly sweet, and truly mortifying. Shen Qingqiu would rather dig his own grave than say it out loud. And he already has, anyways — the digging his grave part, not the other part — several times over, even! There's precedence!

"What about you?" Shen Qingqiu says instead. "Does Binghe wish for anything?"

"Many things," Luo Binghe replies — too swiftly!! Have some more tact, great protagonist! "But most of all, I wish for Shizun's wish to come true."

Ahhh, too smooth! But why toss the question right back to Shen Qingqiu like that, especially with something so hard to follow up! Especially when...

Shen Qingqiu makes his face as thick as he can before laying the wish-granting flower, wife plot #530, on the table next to them. "This master does not need to wish for anything," he says.

Shen Qingqiu has poured over hundreds of chapters of *Proud Immortal Demon Way*, has an encyclopedic memory of this wife and that plot device, so on and so forth. There were so many plot devices that he had praised and cursed alike, wives that he had rooted for and raged against. And yet the most important part of PIDW — the protagonist, the bleeding heart that attracted so many wives, an unending draw for the fans and critics both, was already his! And here, right now, by his side! What more could he want?

Of course, he can't say that out loud, especially with Luo Binghe staring at him with such a devastated expression! "Shizun," Luo Binghe says. "Do you mean..."

Argh, he has to say it out loud, especially with Luo Binghe staring at him with such a hopeful expression.

"This master already has everything he could wish for," Shen Qingqiu says haltingly. Thick face! Thicker face! "... Including you, Binghe."

Shen Qingqiu watches as the words strike true, as Luo Binghe's face blossoms into joy; feels the corner of his own mouth twitch upwards, as if to answer.

In the end, despite all the wife plots and plot holes... they aren't all that unbearable, Shen Qingqiu thinks. Not with Luo Binghe by his side.









# secret little gardens



I.

It is no far stretch to say that Luo Binghe is enthusiastic when it comes to showering his love and affection on Shen Qingqiu. Whether it is something grand and luxurious, or a strange oddity he picks up on a hunt, he enjoys the way Shen Qingqiu poorly conceals his excitement at receiving gifts behind a fan. His face too has become increasingly more honest around Luo Binghe.

This evening's gift is a silk painting Luo Binghe has been working on for the past few days, something to idle away the hottest days of summer. They have been residing at their bamboo cottage, serenely tucked in a valley away from all the noise and demands of the cultivation worlds, both human and demon.

Shen Qingqiu has spent most of the time indoors until the early evening, claiming it to be too hot to move around, leaving Luo Binghe to tend to the small vegetable garden near their cottage. In a more secluded patch of their land, Luo Binghe has also started to cultivate a bed of flowers, growing from the bulbs of whatever he can find. Some have wilted with the summer sun, while others have thrived. These too, he gifts to Shen Qingqiu when he can.

The most recent ones to bloom are ones whose seeds he had snuck out from Qing Jing. Seeing them grow had evoked a memory of his that had gotten buried within him in the abyss; it had gently been dug out when he saw the petals unfurling. That memory was what had drawn him into wanting to paint, spending time deep into the night quietly resolving his feelings with each stroke of the brush.

He hangs the finished work up in one of the smaller rooms in their cottage, where the sun won't stream in and erode the paint as far. The small lamps he sets on either side lend a rich, golden wash to the colors, and he waits eagerly to see what Shen Qingqiu's reaction is, anticipating the same delight that normally crosses his face.

Instead, Shen Qingqiu's face softens as his gaze drifts over the work, something more melancholic settling into his fine features the further down he looks. The usual sparkle in the corner of those deep grey eyes is nowhere to be found, and Luo Binghe gets a creeping feeling of disappointment.

Maybe he did not paint it properly. Maybe it is too ugly for his Shizun's tastes, only a pale imitation of the masters Luo Binghe had studied. Maybe this had been something foolish that Luo Binghe had projected too much of himself into, too

much of himself that Shen Qingqiu may not want.

"Shizun?" Luo Binghe prods gently, but Shen Qingqiu's expression is already lost, as if he's drifted off somewhere else.

### II.

"...Shizun?"

The knock against the door beats in time with the pulsing headache between Shen Qingqiu's temples. The only reason he does not lose his temper immediately is because the voice outside is soft and gentle. Out of all his remaining disciples, Ning Yingying is the one who he extends the most grace to.

"Enter," Shen Qingqiu replies, voice tired. Some days are easier than others; last night, his heart had felt especially raw. It may not make much sense to mourn this deeply over someone who is not truly dead, but Shen Qingqiu cannot help but be steeped in guilt.

He only barely pays attention to Ning Yingying as she gently places down a tray with tea. She looks at him carefully, in the same way all the others have in the three months since the Immortal Alliance Conference had passed. Shen Qingqiu offers her a vague smile as she picks up the teapot, and Ning Yingying keeps her eyes averted.

As she pours the steaming water into the porcelain cup of leaves, he notices the small tremor in the stream. Before he can ask her what's wrong, she's already looking at him with misting eyes.

"Shizun," she starts slowly, and Shen Qingqiu already has a repertoire of sayings of comfort for her. He keeps them easily accessible, so he does not have to draw too deeply from within himself. "That animal Liu-shishu gave us has torn through the bed of lilies."

Shen Qingqiu's mind comes to a halt. Qing Jing has its own meticulously refined gardens, as befitting a scholar's peak, but there is a small patch near the bamboo house where Shen Qingqiu has recently taken to growing his own flowers. He does not allow anyone else to tend it. In fact, up until now, he had not known anyone was aware of its existence; however, with the look that Ning Yingying gives him, he knows there can be no other garden she is talking about.

"I see," Shen Qingqiu replies quietly, feeling something strange and inexplicable well in his throat. "This teacher..."

He had meant to put a fresh wreath of flowers on the sword mound where the shattered remains of Zheng Yang rest. Shen Qingqiu will have to tend to the garden and wait for them to grow again, leaving him with nothing to offer to Luo Binghe's grave. He raises a hand with the intent to send Ning Yingying away, but she seems to have anticipated this already.

"Ah-Luo..." she starts, then stops herself, swallowing around the words. It has been hard for her too, losing her sweet little shidi she had cared so much for. "This disciple cleaned outside the wooden shed some time ago, and found some of these."

Ning Yingying picks up a basket that she had brought in with the tea. Within them, a tenderly picked fresh bundle of flowers rest, catching the sun that drifts into the bamboo house.

They're chrysanthemums in the loosest terms, like many other of the oddities found within this world. They are yellow at a glance, but when tilted in the light, have a strange shimmering and iridescent quality to them, their color shifting to a deep pink or a shell white. These flowers are unlike anything Shen Qingqiu has ever seen before, the quality of them otherworldly. Their fragrance is soft and calming, and entirely too hard for Shen Qingqiu to breathe in.

"Luo-shidi was rather fond of growing them," Ning Yingying says quietly. "Please don't be mad at him for defying your

orders, Shizun. He had cried so much last time you tore them out."

A shade of the man that had once been Shen Qingqiu passes over him, and he finds it hard to look at Ning Yingying. The flowers do not look like proper funerary flowers.

Shen Qingqiu's eyes sting.

"Very well," Shen Qingqiu says faintly. If Luo Binghe was fond of growing them, there was no reason not to use these flowers to honor him.

Still, a little while later, when he kneels at the grave and lays down the flowers, Shen Qingqiu still feels like a row of candles have been lit within him. He has allowed Ning Yingying to accompany him but he regrets it, wanting to be alone.

Despite knowing that Luo Binghe is alive and only growing stronger somewhere out in the abyss, surrounded by blood and violence, despite knowing that he is only playing a necessary role in securing Luo Binghe's importance in the world, Shen Qingqiu still holds the guilt within him. The memory of Luo Binghe's face, one that was unable to comprehend the betrayal, is etched into Shen Qingqiu's heart. His eyes had held Shen Qingqiu in high regard; the hurt and disbelief in them is an expression that still haunts Shen Qingqiu's dreams.

Ning Yingying places a gentle hand on Shen Qingqiu's shoulder, a soft touch to keep him buoyed as he threatens to sink too deep into his emotions. His initial instinct is to dismiss her, but isolation never serves anyone well. So he slowly stands up, opening his fan as he stares down at the sword mound one more time, the corner of his mouth quivering.

The flowers at least are beautiful, even if they are too bright for something so somber. They look like they have been dropped out of the heavens, like they are meant for something in celebration instead of mourning.

He has quietly taken one of them, and has slid it up his sleeve. Shen Qingqiu has no reason to hide it from Ning Yingying, but it feels too private to share. He'll keep it beside his bed for days till it finally withers away. Each time he looks at it, he'll wonder if he could have cheated the system somehow, if there was something he could have done differently.

And each time he looks at it, he'll wonder if Luo Binghe will ever forgive him.

### III.

At this young age, Luo Binghe is naive in the way he finds beauty in a cruel world. But he is not to blame; the love he is shown allows him to think that he is permitted to take up space. He optimistically tries to repay it whenever he can.

He is ten, his mother has just fallen sick again, and Luo Binghe works hard to earn enough money for her medicine and her food. She insists that he should eat and he does; the scraps and thrown-away food that she normally eats, he takes instead, and cooks her a meal with the rice he breaks his back to buy. He does it with no complaint, just to see the color return in her pale face.

One day, Luo Binghe comes back from a day of sweeping at the front steps of one of the larger mansions deeper in the city. They had paid him half what they had said they would, claiming there were still traces of dirt in the corners, and Luo Binghe had not been able to argue for what was his. He had, however, been able to sneak into one of the smaller outer courtyards afterward. The remainder of his payment is tucked away deep within his dirtied shirt, and he presents it proudly to his mother when he reaches the small shack that they call their home.

Her eyes go wide at the colour of the chrysanthemum. It is a colour unlike anything either of them have seen before; it shimmers like a sunset, changing colour when it is moved. Luo Binghe does not understand the troubled look that flashes across her face, just that her face falls briefly before she sweeps him into a hug.

Her arms are frail around him, shaking gently.

"I do not know how you got this," she says, and Luo Binghe feels his heart start to sink. "It is a precious, precious flower. You... can only give it to the one you love the most."

"You are the one I love the most," Luo Binghe insists with the strong conviction of a child, and she gives him a weak smile.

"You must keep it a secret then," she says, reaching out to run her hand through his hair. Luo Binghe closes his eyes to the touch, missing the way that worry etches another line into her skin. "For me. Hide it so that no one will see it."

Luo Binghe does not want to. He would rather show off his love for his mother. But she insists that he conceal it and keep it away. She cushions her words by telling him that one day, he will be loved deeply by someone as much as she loves him, and that he should give it to them.

He finds it hard to believe at the time. He finds it harder to believe when she passes away, hungry and sick, using her last breath to say his name. And he finds it hardest to believe when he gets accepted into a prestigious sect, only to be so thoroughly beaten down to the ground that he can feel his spirit start to structure.

Yet he holds on to the flowers anyways; the original one, he dries and presses and keeps under his bed, only to have it stolen and thrown into the pond by Ming Fan. Later, while being made to sort out dusty shelves in one of the more decrepit storage sheds in Qing Jing, Luo Binghe finds a small row of glass jars, each with seeds. Luo Binghe knows where the best secluded spots on the peak are, ones that even the shixiongs that torment him are unaware of.

Most of the plants fail, but the flowers that bloom on the small, weak bush that survive are incredibly familiar. They have the same coruscating and ever-changing colours, the same gentle and comforting scent. The flowers remind him of his mother, and the first frail bloom of the flowers make his eyes well.

Even after Shen Qingqiu finds them and stomps them out, calling the mere act of tending to the flowers audacious, Luo Binghe grows them again, this time more careful to hide them away, just like his mother said. He pours his optimism into the way he nurtures the flowers but still keeps them a secret, even after Shen Qingqiu shows him greater kindness.

It may be a fool's task but for Luo Binghe, the small, weak flowers remain a vestige of hope that someone, one day, will love him.

### IV.

"If it is not to Shizun's liking, this disciple can have it taken away," Luo Binghe says quietly, and Shen Qingqiu snaps back to the present. He had gotten so lost in his memories that for a moment, he had forgotten where he was.

Luo Binghe's voice sounds like it is very much trying to hide its dejection. Shen Qingqiu turns his head to look at Luo Binghe, who's looking back at him with an extremely hopeful expression. He doesn't know how to tell Luo Binghe that

this painting brings back a memory that hurts him more than he will ever let on. It feels like an old wound reopened, through no fault of Luo Binghe's.

But who was Shen Qingqiu to deny such a gift, such a gesture? Even if he had mourned before, was Luo Binghe not standing before him, robust and healthy and very much alive? He had used these flowers to grieve, but Luo Binghe sees them as something more precious. If he were to forever associate them with such sadness, what good would it do him?

Luo Binghe starts to shift, undoubtedly to pull down the painting. Shen Qingqiu stops him with a small thwack of his closed fan against his wrist. Luo Binghe's hand jerks back and Shen Qingqiu opens his fan, moving it in short, contemplative motions.

A series of emotions make their way across Luo Binghe's face, and Shen Qingqiu has to draw his fan closer to hide his own. Ultimately, as it often does, Luo Binghe's look settles on one of soft delight once he sees Shen Qingqiu give a minute nod. It is a rather moving face, and Shen Qingqiu feels his heart start to overflow.

He reaches for Luo Binghe's hand, sliding his index finger around the other man's little one, and tugging gently. It is a simple gesture disguised by the sleeves of their robes, but it does not fail to make Luo Binghe's eyes glimmer. Nor does Shen Qingqiu lowering his fan and taking a quick glance around as if anyone could show up here out of thin air, before tugging Luo Binghe in.

Whatever sound of surprise Luo Binghe makes, Shen Qingqiu swallows down in a firm kiss. Luo Binghe, to his credit, does not flail around too much. His hands instead slide around Shen Qingqiu's lithe waist, and squeeze him tight.

Luo Binghe has not left his side. Yet Shen Qingqiu feels a deep yearning for the man that holds him, one that makes him want to pull Luo Binghe closer despite his own thin face. Thankfully, he's saved from having to do it by virtue of Luo Binghe's own enthusiasm.

It is strange that something so innocuous would ignite his memories like this, but he supposes it cannot be helped. The painting itself is quite lovely; it is a painting of their small corner of this world they call home, the valley yawning around the river. There are no figures in the painting, but there are beautifully painted flowers. And somehow, Luo Binghe has captured those strange, iridescent colors within the chrysanthemums he's drawn in the foreground, each painted with careful detail, each of them looking like the flowers Shen Qingqiu had laid on his grave. They had become funeral flowers to Shen Qingqiu since that day, and to see them once again...

Shen Qingqiu breaks the kiss off gently, reluctant to let go. He still keeps his hand enclosed around Luo Binghe's, and he feels the warm palm around his tighten with Luo Binghe's realization that he is not letting go.

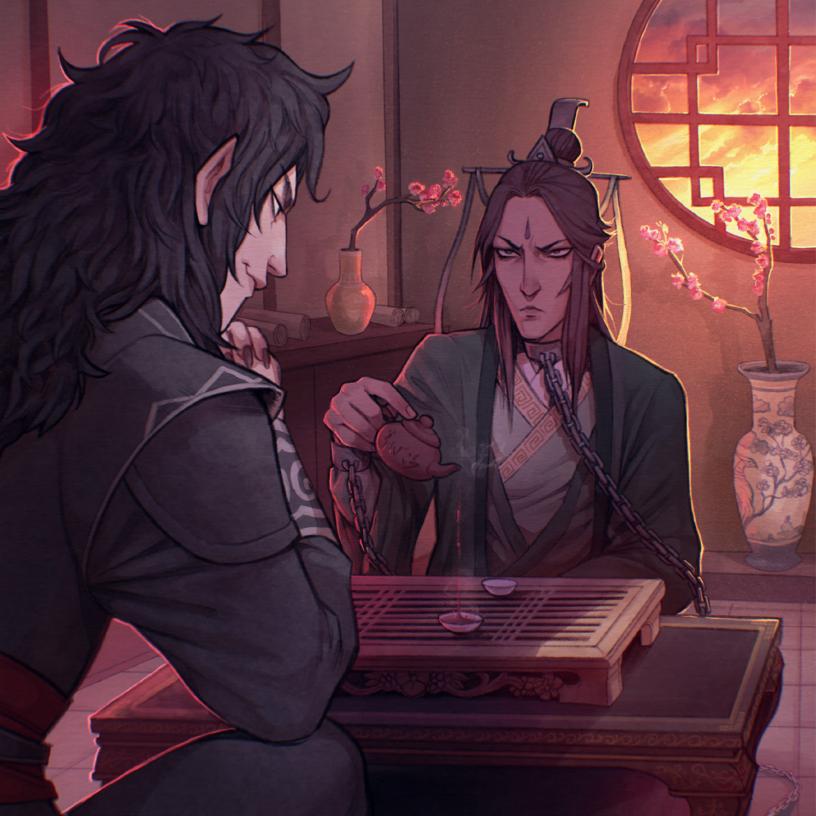
"Binghe worked so hard on this painting, and he wants to take it away before I can fully admire it?" Shen Qingqiu teases as they pull apart and he can practically feel the way Luo Binghe deflates with relief.

The smile Luo Binghe gives him is so dazzling he almost reaches up to hide it with his lips once again. But Shen Qingqiu pauses halfway there, and decides instead to open his arms and pull Luo Binghe into as big a hug as he can possibly muster.

"You will not touch it," Shen Qingqiu murmurs. Luo Binghe is warm and solid in his arms, and loops his own around Shen Qingqiu's waist, squeezing hard. "This teacher refuses to have such a precious gift taken away."







### The Peach Blossoms in Spring



### SHEN YUAN

The peach blossoms are in full bloom.

Every spring, Southern Tian thaws in ripples of pink, air sweet with the fragrance of new flowers.

It's said that the late empress, Su Xiyan, had accepted Tianlang-Di's court while a single peach tree stood witness — their union blessed by a shower of pale petals.

As part of his betrothal gift, Tianlang-Di had subsequently ordered ten thousand peach trees planted throughout the capital, so all may behold the vibrant proof of their love. It was a romantic gesture that set many a maiden's heart a-flutter.

Even Shen Yuan, who doesn't have a romantic bone in his body, thinks it incredibly impressive. After all, how many can claim their wedding changed the topography of a city overnight?

According to some gratuitously florid accounts, the late empress had been escorted down a carpet of blossoms in an ornate bridal sedan, cast completely out of gold. The procession wound through the streets, loud and lively, led by a full orchestra and flanked by a sizeable army.

Impressive. That was all Shen Yuan thought of Southern Tian's last royal wedding. It's an excellent source of trivia, to be employed for small talk when hosting friends and family from outside the capital. He hasn't thought much else about it, because why would he?

It's not like he's ever going to be involved in a royal wedding.

Of course, the casual disregard for extremely improbable outcomes was likely what led to his present predicament, because the fates are smugly contrary bastards. So yes, here he is, in the midst of being royally wedded.

The worst thing is, it's not even supposed to be *him* in the bridal sedan.

It's supposed to be his third brother, Shen Jiu.

Only. That would have been a monumentally disastrous idea.

You see, three weeks ago, Shen Yuan nearly died.

He'd gone boating with his fifth sister and capsized them to avoid hitting a turtle. Shen Ling had come out of that little misadventure with nary a scratch or a sneeze. Shen Yuan, on the other hand, had bumped his head *and* caught a terrible cold. He spent the following week unconscious, bedridden either by his concussion or his mind-scrambling fever.

When he finally regained possession of his faculties, Shen Yuan was privy to some worryingly realistic visions of another life. Where he might have been... something of a literary critic.

All those books he'd read... All those rants— ahem, reviews he'd written... Most of them blurred to a vague impression, albeit like a dream slipping away to the edge of the mind with the dawn of a new day.

And then there's That One Novel.

The one he'd really like to forget but *can't*. The pinnacle of frustratingly dissatisfying fiction. The whole reason behind his frankly atrocious behaviour, because drugging your own brother and taking his place in the bridal sedan is frowned upon in general, and could actually be considered a capital offense in situations where the groom comes from royalty, but he's trying *very hard* not to think about that right now.

Shen Yuan fiddles with the gold-threaded hem of his veil, takes a couple of breaths to settle his nerves. It's fine, everything's fine. The arrangement they had with Tianglang-Di only stipulated that a scion of Shen bloodline would marry the crown prince. They're not technically reneging on it by switching Shen Jiu out for Shen Yuan. His Highness shouldn't be offended, right? After all, the entire point of this endeavour is to help his family avoid their cannon fodder fate in—

Proud Tyrannical Emperor Way.

Shen Yuan's chest constricts with *indescribable fury* at the thought of that thousand-chapter behemoth of utterly undeserving acclaim, chronicling the rise of its unfortunate protagonist from kindly, honourable crown prince to, well, Proud Tyrannical Emperor.

It was a patchwork of trite tropes and caricaturist characters, loosely tied together by a thin excuse of a plot that only served to spotlight the protagonist's abysmal luck with everything other than women. And. They're. All. Currently. Living. In. It.

Why? What have they done to deserve this?

In the novel, Shen Jiu married the crown prince as he was supposed to, but soon grew embittered by life in the imperial harem. Thinking his potential unjustly stymied, he fell in with a few conniving courtiers who promised him a minor ministerial position, should he help with their plans to oust the crown prince and instate Tianlang-Di's nephew, Zhuzhi-Wang.

Following a series of terribly thought-out attempts at regicide, Shen Jiu was betrayed by his co-conspirators and essentially made a scapegoat. Their family was heavily implicated by his actions, a good many of them executed. Those spared by the crown prince's mercy were exiled to the borderlands, where they probably still died of lung fever or starvation.

All in all, Shen Jiu's role was that of a preliminary antagonist. He only appeared for the first hundred chapters or so, acting as a springboard for the protagonist's character growth. He taught the young prince that kindness does not beget kindness; that the people closest to you are the ones who can hurt you most; and that wearing your heart on your sleeve is a sure-fire way to get it broken.

Shen Yuan does not want their future emperor to learn these lessons. So here he is, in his brother's bridal sedan, pretending to be his brother, who's out cold in his chambers back home, because nobody will listen to him when he tells them that this wedding is a Monumentally Disastrous Idea.

He startles as a perfunctory knock comes on the door of the sedan, and then a hand reaches in, palm up. Oh. *Oh.* Shen Yuan hastily flips the veil back over his face, belatedly noticing that the procession has come to a stop, and the orchestra has petered out. After an awkward length of silence, someone clears their throat, calls out tentatively.

"Shen-San Gong Zi?"

The hand in front of him wavers, fingers curling ever so slightly. Shen Yuan coughs. Right. He hadn't meant to leave the crown prince hanging.

With a soft apology, he rises from his seat, grabs the proffered hand. And just as he's stepping out, his right foot snags onto the voluminous train of his robes. He promptly loses his balance, tumbling straight through the door and into the stiffly awkward embrace of a lanky youth.

### LUO BINGHE

Luo Binghe stares dazedly at the veiled figure who's fallen into his arms with the ethereal grace of an immortal descending unto earthly lands from the heavens above.

Ever since he grew out of the imperial nursery and into his own princely estate, men and women have been falling over themselves to curry his favour — quite literally, many have taken to swooning dramatically in his direction, hoping to climb up the palace hierarchy by climbing into his bed.

He's never entertained them, of course, but on the flip side, he's never punished them either. It just seems unnecessarily brutal when the most frequent of offenders are naïve young masters and mistresses who grew up on his parents' ridiculous romantic exploits and fancy themselves the next Su Xiyan.

Never mind that Su Xiyan had died a mysterious death and Tianlang-Di had then mourned himself halfway to an early grave. All everyone remembers is the ten-thousand-peach-tree-proposal that wreaths the city in a perfumed haze of pink each spring.

And it is precisely because of this peach-induced marriage fever, that the third month of every year sees a marked increase in people trying to re-enact the emperor and late empress's storied first encounter, by tripping over flat surfaces whenever there's even a remote possibility of Luo Binghe catching them.

Consequently, Luo Binghe has gotten quite adept at dodging these damsels and lordlings in dubious distress.

He's just... never expected to be accosted by his own bride — on their wedding day no less!

After all, Shen Jiu's only appeared to be interested in their marriage insofar as it can benefit his eldest brother's standing at court. He's not shown any interest in Luo Binghe as a person, much less a *husband*.

But... perhaps it had all been an act? The cool indifference, the thoroughly put-upon attitude he displayed when they formalised their betrothal, as if to make it abundantly clear that he's going through with everything for strictly *political* reasons...

Or is *this* the act? This serene, dignified manner by which he comports himself, pulling away so they're a respectable distance apart and then smoothly transferring his grip from Luo Binghe's entire hand to the flat of his palm, as propriety dictates.

Not for the first time, Luo Binghe wonders how his new consort will establish himself in the palace's rear courtyard.

Will he charm Tianlang-Di's old concubines and ingratiate himself with someone influential? Will he strike first to deter potential acts of pettiness, use his family's clout to impress it upon others that he is not to be trifled with? Or will he remove himself from the power struggles altogether, retreating to the fringes so he can observe everything with an impartial eye?

Each option has its merits and drawbacks. Regardless of his bride's choice, Luo Binghe's resolved to stand by him.

Because Shen Jiu may be a... prickly sort, and Luo Binghe holds no illusions about their match, but a husband and wife must be of one heart and mind for there to be peace in the household. Considering how as future emperor and empress, their household comprises all of Southern Tian, it is especially important that they present a united front in all matters.

This resolve grounds him, eases his nerves and sharpens his mind, as he guides his bride up the hundred-step stairway to the Hall of Eternal Joy, where their wedding rites are to be conducted.

Where the shrewdest ministers of his father's court and the strongest generals of his father's armies are all in attendance.

And it's been some time since Luo Binghe indulged in an activity as childish and frivolous as wishful thinking, but in this moment... he wishes his parents were here.

He wishes they were sitting up on the dais, staring down the rest of the hall as he walks his bride in—his father obnoxiously proud and his mother a paragon of long-suffering exasperation.

He wishes he didn't have to do this alone.

"Your Highness?"

Luo Binghe startles at the soft sting of nails biting into the flesh of his palm. He drops his gaze to their clasped hands, and comes to the belated realisation that he's been squeezing the life out of his bride's poor fingers.

Slender, elegant, porcelain white fingers. Tipped with petal-pink nails, daintily shaped and fastidiously trimmed.

He hastily relaxes his grip, more than a little surprised that Shen Jiu would endure this affront for any length of time without making his displeasure known.

"Apologies. This prince has forgotten himself in his enthusiasm."

It's a poor excuse, with not the charm to lend it credence, and not the eloquence to lend it authority. Luo Binghe fully expects to be on the receiving end of some retaliatory smackdown or other—a snide remark, at the very least, maybe an 'accidentally' spilt tea cup...

Instead, what he gets is a gentle, comforting squeeze.

His bride realigns their hands so they're palm to palm, laces their fingers together in what feels like the courtly equivalent of a heartfelt embrace.

And Luo Binghe is... Luo Binghe is... floored. Completely and utterly!

Is this even Shen Jiu under the veil?

Can this really be the same man who looks at him and sees nothing but the means to an end? Whose civility hinges on the assurance that his new prince consort perks can help advance his brother's career? Who's shown no emotion in all their talks save for polite disinterest and careless disdain?

No. It's wildly absurd, and vastly improbable, but Luo Binghe's gut tells him that this is not whom he was promised. So what he ought to do right now is expose the imposter, then promptly call off this farce of a wedding.

And yet...

And yet.

It just doesn't seem *fair*. Knowing Shen Jiu, he's probably browbeaten or sweettalked some unsuspecting, unfortunate relation from the province to take his place. Some tender-hearted ingenue who has no idea what he's getting himself into. And if Luo Binghe reveals their trickery now, the poor man would be liable to take the fall.

Shen Jiu would probably deny all involvement. Insist his 'scheming, ungrateful cousin' knocked him out and stole into his bridal sedan, or something to that effect. And he'd get away with it because the law favours those with the means to make their versions of the truth stick.

It's disgusting and deplorable and Luo Binghe refuses to have this injustice on his conscience.

Unfortunately, short of launching an inquiry that would take months to process and upend the court's delicate balance of power, resulting in a cascade of other problems, there's truly nothing to be done. So rather than make a scene, Luo Binghe calmly helps his bride over the threshold and into the ceremonial hall, as if nothing is amiss.

Let Shen Jiu think he's succeeded. Let them all think their crown prince meek and easily duped. Let the lawless reign and the merciless reap. The heavens' judgement will come swift and unerring when the day of reckoning dawns upon these transgressors!

In the meantime... Luo Binghe will be revising his arrangements for *this* new bride, who probably knows little of what a prince consort is to do, or how a prince consort ought to behave, and will thus be better served by more attentive, *assertive* attendants. Ones equipped to fight their master's battles if need be.

Then again, who would be better equipped to fight his consort's battles than Luo Binghe himself?

He's partly responsible for the man's present situation, and fully responsible for the man's future wellbeing. It only makes sense that he personally commits to the protection of his bride from all possible pitfalls in the palace, by keeping close *all the time*.

That way, should any conniving lord or lady attempt to undermine his consort with their machinations, he'll be able to swiftly nip things in the bud.

Mind made up, Luo Binghe bows to the heavens, to his ancestors and finally, to his bride.

Who mirrors the motion with an innately refined air, veil flaring briefly as he smoothly bends at the waist. Under it, Luo Binghe thinks he spies the softest curve of peach-ripe lips, pursed like a furled flower, and silken like the first stirrings of spring.

### SHEN YUAN

Weddings are enjoyable for everyone save the people actually involved.

That's the unfortunate epiphany Shen Yuan comes to, after waiting laboriously in his nuptial chambers for a good three shichen.

At first, he'd been working himself up to a nervous breakdown, rehearsing his speech for the crown prince over and over, because once the veil comes off and the jig is up, he's banking largely on the protagonist's merciful heart to avoid whatever punishment is typically prescribed for identity fraud.

But as the day wore on, it became apparent that Shen Yuan's new husband would not be joining him any time soon. Their guests were all vying for the crown prince's time, and it would likely be past Xu-Shi when the crown prince is done fielding all their toasts and well wishes, a maid from the bridal retinue had quietly informed him. Shen Yuan's anxiety soon ran its course, leaving him instead with a terrible, mind-numbing *boredom*.

He would have been hungry too, if not for the plates of snacks the crown prince had secretly delivered. Traditionally, brides are supposed to go without food in the time between the ceremony and... consummation, but by virtue of His Highness's magnanimity, Shen Yuan is spared the discomfort.

It's a kindness he had not expected, and he feels slightly guilty to be partaking in it because it's technically... not meant for him? The food's far too tempting to pass up, however. And the stress has him absolutely ravenous, so Shen Yuan ends up cleaning the plates of every last morsel.

Sated and complacent, he dozes while waiting and must have knocked out for more than a moment because it's dark out and the attendants on the porch are announcing the crown prince's arrival when he comes awake again.

Shen Yuan composes himself in record time.

"Begging my bride's pardon," Luo Binghe says, as he hastily sweeps into the room. "This prince did not mean to tarry. But many hoped to extend their felicitations for our marriage, and this prince thought it would be good to receive them on his bride's behalf."

Still a little sluggish from sleep, Shen Yuan struggles to find the appropriate response and after a beat, settles on, "This subject understands."

The harried footsteps stop right in front of him and a pair of sturdy satin boots appears in his veil-limited field of vision — black with red embroidered dragons coiling around the ankles. His pulse takes off in a sprint when it dawns on him that this is it. This is his chance to change things. And the speech he's rehearsed all but melds into a jumble of words as he prepares to explain himself.

Before he can even utter a word, there's a rustle of silk and then more footsteps as all the guards and servants retreat out of the room. Shen Yuan is left feeling incredibly wrong-footed as the crown prince sits *right* beside him and takes his hand.

"This prince knows his bride is not Shen-San Gong Zi."

Wait, what?

Shen Yuan thinks his heart may have stopped.

"This prince understands his bride may be in a difficult position, and gives him leave to speak freely while they are alone in this room."

Okay. Uh. Wow.

Shen Yuan is still reeling from the fact that the crown prince *knows* when his veil is suddenly lifted out of the way, and he's confronted with the brightest-eyed, sweetest-faced boy he's ever seen in his life. It takes a moment for his brain to catch up and register that this is the Crown Prince Luo Binghe. *This* is Southern Tian's future tyrant.

Well, not if he can help it.

"How?" he asks, before he can help himself.

Luo Binghe lowers his gaze to their hands. "This prince does not mean to be presumptuous, but Shen-San Gong Zi would not allow such liberties." And then, as if worried he'd given offense, promptly adds, "That is not to say his bride is any *less* for allowing such liberties. As a matter of fact, this prince finds his bride incredibly distinguished. If his bride would care to share his name, this prince would be exceptionally pleased."

Shen Yuan clears his throat. "This subject— This *consort* is Shen Yuan, first son of Qingjing-Gong, elder brother to Shen Jiu."

"Shen Yuan... Shen-Gong Zi?" Luo Binghe blinks, almost owlishly. "This prince... This prince is honoured to make Shen-Gong Zi's acquaintance! But... he does not understand why Shen-Gong Zi is here. Is Shen-Gong Zi here on his own accord?"

"Yes. This subject fears his third brother is ill-suited for life in the palace and wilfully thought he could take his place." Shen Yuan inclines his head, keeps his tone appropriately deferential. "If His Highness wishes to punish anyone for this transgression, this subject must stress that he acted on his own impulses. May His Highness be merciful and spare this subject's family."

There. That should sound convincingly noble.

"No, no! This prince has no intention to punish Shen-Gong Zi or the Shen family. This prince... is just surprised that Shen-Gong Zi would willingly give up his future for a life in the rear courtyard."

"On the contrary, what is one's future but a vehicle to pave the future of Southern Tian?" Shen Yuan counters. "Front or rear courtyard, as long as this subject can effectively serve his country, his emperor and his people, he will consider his life one that is well-lived. If the crown prince requires an ally through matrimony, then that is the role this subject willingly plays."

A standing ovation! He deserves a standing ovation for that speech! Was that not a rousing declaration of patriotism? Would that not have earned him a N\*ble Prize or two, were he still living in that other life, in that other time?

Luo Binghe must surely think so, for his eyes mist over as he proclaims, "This prince is heartened that Shen-Gong Zi holds him in such high esteem! He will endeavour not to fall short of Shen-Gong Zi's expectations!"

Oh. Oh no. What a pure and earnest child! Shen Yuan can't believe this promising youth, so brimming with hope and righteous ideals, is set to become a tyrant after suffering multiple devastating grievances. Who could bear to let such a thing happen? Not Shen Yuan! Why, he's now double determined to stop the plot in its tracks! Take that, hack author!

He pats the prince's hand firmly. "If this subject may be so bold, we will endeavour together."

Luo Binghe gives him a watery grin and an enthusiastic nod, and then offers to sleep on the chaise while Shen Yuan takes the bed. Which is ridiculous, because the bed is definitely big enough to share. So an incense stick later, they're both tucked beneath the covers and Shen Yuan's making plans to sidestep every egregious plot point.

See, Shen Jiu may be an expert at reading people, but Shen Yuan is the leading authority on trashy literature tropes. He has two lifetimes of novel-reading experience under his belt. He can see a poorly constructed plot twist a li away. There will be no blackening of this sparkly-eyed, baby bun of a prince on his watch.

'Amidst the ashes of ten thousand trees, the crown prince is reborn, heart blackened like the charred remains of his parents' graves'?

No. Nope. Absolutely not. Like hell Shen Yuan's going to let that come to pass.

This time next year, their peach blossoms will still be blooming vibrantly, and their crown prince will still be a fresh, upright little sprout! Southern Tian will not fall at the hands of an intelligence-insulting cliche! Stupid author, stupid novel!







# We are not intopians BY BOSBIE

Not even the prosperous Jinlan City, notorious for its wealthy merchants and high-nosed aristocrats accustomed to beautiful things, could resist the urge to stop and stare when the young cultivator breached its borders. *How handsome!* it cried — for it was impossible for the city and its inhabitants to look away from the vitality of that adolescent face, that trim figure accentuated by tailored white robes, that disarming smile on plump lips. Cultivators were common enough in this city, but none as pleasing, as graceful, as *protagonist-worthy*, as the boyish youth striding along the crowded marketplace like an autumn leaf swaying toward the forest floor.

And so the boy was welcomed with open arms. His path through the Jinlan inner streets was accompanied with admiring glances and hushed whispers, as laborers and gentry folk alike cleared a path for him to walk undisturbed. This display may have perturbed the common man, unused to turning heads and overt stares searing into his back. But Luo Binghe, head disciple of Qing Jing Peak and doted upon pup of immortal cultivator Shen Qingqiu, was by now if not pleased with, then at least used to the attention, and kept his chin high as he perused the food stalls lining the central road.

After all, he had traveled far. And for Shen Qingqiu, Luo Binghe was willing to travel into the demon realm itself — whether the reason be as grand as scouring the earth for a cure for an illness without a cure, or as sentimental as appeasing a craving. There was a merchant in this city rumored to sell the finest dragon's beard candy in the human realm, and Luo Binghe's shizun loved sweets.

The thought of bringing his master pleasure sent a thrill down his spine. Yes, the distance traveled was a small price to pay for such a precious reward.

But for now, another price to pay: this sweets merchant was in high demand, and her wares weren't cheap. Luo Binghe spotted a storefront lined with clouds of sugar and approached it, making sure his smile was gentle and eyes sincere.

"Hello, auntie," he said to the merchant. "How much would it cost for a box of your dragon's beard candy?"

The merchant flushed. How flattering it was, bearing the brunt of such sweet attention! She packed a box of dragon's beard candy and, when Luo Binche paid and thanked her, insisted he take along with him additional boxes filled with enough treats to satisfy Shizun's sweet tooth for the rest of spring: steamed sponge cake sliced into wedges, sesame balls filled with red bean paste, skewered strawberries dipped in glass sugar.

"For being such a good boy!" she said when he asked why.

Armed with triple the amount he had anticipated to purchase, he placed them all into his qiankun bag and mentally tallied up the price. It was a lot. Fortunately, as a disciple of Qing Jing Peak he was allotted an allowance, enough for one to indulge every so often. Modest to most, but to Luo Binghe, who spent much of his youth with much less, it was a tangible testament to the hard life he had endured before he was taken under Shen Qingqiu's care.

But when he counted up his remaining allowance, he realized that it wasn't enough. He lifted up his last few taels and grimaced in apology.

The merchant recoiled as if Luo Binghe had pointed a sword to her throat. "Oh, no, there's no need, that was a gift!" she exclaimed, waving his hand away.

The silver taels clinked against each other in Luo Binghe's palm. He pressed his lips into another smile, adamant in its loveliness. "Auntie, I can't accept this."

Her already smitten face melted into enamored goo. "Young master," she said, "I insist."

Luo Binghe tried to pay her again, but the merchant was stalwart. So with a courteous bow he stepped away from her stall. The merchant waved, and for the rest of the day, the memory of that charming young master kept a pleasant warmth kindling in her heart.

As for Luo Binghe, the merchant's kindness continued to prod at him while he ambled through the marketplace. The back of his neck prickled with an unnatural chill.

Each box the merchant gifted him was worth what his washerwoman mother had made in a year.

That wasn't a tremendous feat. His mother hadn't been paid much. Luo Binghe shouldered his qiankun bag and raised his chin, finding it harder now to look in the eyes of those who stepped out of his path and nodded when he walked past, their robes made of the same vibrant dyes and soft silks his mother had hunched over and scrubbed with her gnarled, liver-spotted hands until she crawled into her bed of straw and died.

Luo Binghe sucked in a breath, grounding himself in the market musk of coriander and smoked fish. Shizun hadn't taught him to be this sentimental. No looking back. Only forward. So he blinked the memory away.

But as he shopped the Jinlan storefronts, it was as if Luo Binghe's conversation with the merchant unveiled something his brain had been subconsciously ignoring. The attention and the sighs. The fond lines crinkling a shopowner's eyes when Luo Binghe entered their storefronts.

"Why?" Luo Binghe asked a woodworker, who had winked and added an extra varnished rosewood food container to the set of varnished rosewood food containers Luo Binghe had already paid for. Why gift me this when I can now afford to pay you?

The vendor only clutched his belly and laughed like Luo Binghe had told a joke.

It was easy for them, this simple compassion. Freely given for the simple reason of *why not*? But it came too late to be greeted with necessity or even gratitude from Luo Binghe. He did not need their charity, not anymore.

The street, then, was no longer a bustling marketplace, but the shadowed corners Luo Binghe had squeezed into when the street dogs were too vicious with their hunger. In a trick of the light, smiling merchants who gifted boxes of spun sugar twisted into the looming stall keepers armed with wooden batons they had used to strike Luo Binghe's bony wrists when he scavenged too close to their stalls.

Where had this simple compassion been when Luo Binghe truly needed it?

Luo Binghe looked down at his robes. Simple yet sturdy in its quality. Imbued with talismans to protect him from demonic attack and the cold. When he first joined Qing Jing Peak the fabric felt too slippery against his skin, for he had known nothing else but the rough scratch of crudely worsted cotton. By now he barely registered it — his clothes were as a part of him as his hands and his sword.

This was who people saw him as: a clean-faced, well-dressed young master wearing the colors of one of the most influential cultivation sects in the human realm. His future was a promising one: he was on the cusp of breaching the core formation stage and wielded a sword with the skill of a cultivator twice his age. He was handsome and could afford to buy sweet delicacies with

no sweat off his back. These were more than enough reasons to treat him with respect.

Luo Binghe did not know why this frustrated him.

He didn't know why he was frustrated at all. He should
be glad that, despite the misfortune that hounded
him like a shadow, he had overcome the pitfalls of his
humble birth and was beginning to make a name for himself in the
cultivation world. It was by his own merit that the common man was
beginning to see him as one worthy of admiration rather than not seeing him at all.

Merit, and Shen Qingqiu.

As always, the thought of his master levied Luo Binghe's darkening mind with an aching fondness. He cursed his pride for allowing himself to take sole credit for his success. It was *Shizun* who had singled out that small, malnourished orphan out of hundreds of initiates and decided: *That one. That one holds promise*. And he had facilitated that spark of promise into the man Luo Binghe was today. Luo Binghe would be nothing without Shizun.

Or, no. Not nothing. Something far worse than that. He would be as he was before his ascent up Cang Qiong Mountain. A son of a washerwoman, a stray on the street, an abandoned infant floating along a river. Merchants would not indulge him, and gentry would not step out of his way on the street. Days would be hard again and beatings by unsatisfied estate masters would be harder. He would once again be unloved and ignored.

It was getting late; Luo Binghe would have to hurry if he wanted to return to Qing Jing Peak on time. He returned to the stable where he had left his horse and handed his last tael to the stable boy who had been tending to her while he was gone. The stable boy carefully accepted the tael and tucked it into a pocket stitched to the breast of his tunic.

"Thank you, Young Master," he said, diction slow and careful. His gaze was fixed to his feet as he handed Luo Binghe the reins, and he flinched away when Luo Binghe took it from him.

Luo Binghe tried very hard to smile. He succeeded, but could tell by feeling alone that it was an unconvincing one. He mounted his horse and left the stable and the city behind.

Hopefully, this strange mood would pass before Luo Binghe made it to Qing Jing Peak. He couldn't afford to let it tamper with his plans, after all; it would take just under a week to ride back on horseback, and spring was nearing its zenith. That was when the meadow a stone's throw away from his and Shizun's bamboo house would be at its most vibrant — a perfect spot to treat Shizun with a meal surrounded by the nature of his domain.

Luo Binghe imagined his plan unfurling the way it did dozens of times in his dream realm: an afternoon enjoying a homemade meal with peonies and chrysanthemums framing Shizun with a rosy glow, complimenting the flushed pink of his plush lips as they wrap prettily around the food Luo Binghe fretted over. Pleased with his disciple's earnest efforts, Shizun would smile at him, maybe even pat his head, and maybe his palm would smooth down from Luo Binghe's hair to his cheek, and maybe Luo Binghe would *die*.

How serene! How...romantic! Sharp wind buffeted the answering heat that spread across Luo Binghe's cheeks, and he leaned forward to urge his horse to go faster.

Already, he could feel his troubles huddle into a corner of his mind that was easier to ignore.

But it still tugged at him: even as he arrived at Qing Jing Peak and was greeted with the beautiful sight of his master. While he cooked their meal and artfully arranged them in his new rosewood food containers. Later, as he led Shizun to the meadow,

the spread-out blanket and the boxes filled with homemade food and the sweets from Jinlan City. And even as he watched a grin spread across Shizun's face as he realized Luo Binghe's intentions.

"You're indulging this master," Shizun told him from behind his fan. While he didn't yet give Luo Binghe his muchanticipated head pat, the afternoon was still young, and so far Shizun seemed very satisfied.

The day was going just as Luo Binghe had dreamed it would be. Only, he didn't soak it in as greedily as he would have liked. His conscience was, he hated to admit, still tainted — for once, Shizun hadn't been on his mind while he was preparing their meal. While he was slicing ginger and skimming the scum out off boiling pork, it had been his mother at the forefront of his thoughts. Her love for him, the tender way her work-weathered hands handled their meager kitchen. She had hummed as she cooked. Luo Binghe had learned everything he knew about cooking by watching her.

Luo Binghe had long since come to the conclusion that his mother died from exhaustion. The medicine he struggled to purchase but was too late to give wouldn't have been able to undue the consequences of living a life of back-breaking labor. Her decline had been decades in the making and had begun far before she lifted him out of the Luo River. There was no reason for guilt; nothing he could have done would have saved her.

But that wasn't the problem, Luo Binghe realized. His mother had been a kind woman with a beautiful heart, and in a perfect world, she shouldn't have suffered at all.

A soft, "Binghe?" pulled him out of his contemplation, and he blinked to find Shizun studying him with concern. "Is something troubling you?"

"This disciple apologizes for worrying Shizun," Luo Binghe hastily replied. "I've only been thinking about some things, and have come to a conclusion regarding a personal matter."

Shizun had always been an inquisitive man. "Oh?" He cocked his head, a lock of hair sliding over his slim shoulder. "And would you be comfortable with sharing what's been on your mind?"

Luo Binghe would share everything with Shizun if he could. "Of course, but it isn't an important concern. In Jinlan City, I was treated very kindly. I noticed this, and was reminded of when this wasn't the case."

Shizun's face grew grim, and Luo Binghe was quick to placate, "This disciple knows Shizun has only wanted the best for me—at that moment, you hadn't at all crossed my mind, but rather my mother."

"Your mother...didn't treat you well?"

"No, that isn't what I meant! My mother loved me." Luo Binghe frowned at his inability to wrangle his thoughts together.

"It wasn't her who treated me unkindly," he decided to say. "It was everyone else."

After a pause, Shizun plucked a piece of dragon's beard candy out of its box and nodded. "I see. This world can be cruel to those without the money, reputation, or skill to rebuke it."

"It shouldn't be." Luo Binghe stared down at their half-finished food, a sudden weight in his chest replacing his hunger. "Those merchants could give me nice things and those gentry folk could look me in the eyes now that I'm a young master — why couldn't they afford me that same kindness when I was an orphan? Maybe if they did, I wouldn't have needed to beg for food on the streets, and my mother wouldn't have needed to work so hard it killed her."

Suddenly embarrassed at his outburst, Luo Binghe risked a glance at his master, but Shizun only seemed thoughtful. A wind rustled the surrounding green of the meadow as they sat together in contemplative silence.

Finally, Shizun asked, "Is this the foregone conclusion you had alluded to earlier?"

Luo Binghe hesitated. His thoughts since Jinlan City were jumbled and incorporeal, strung together only by his

underlying frustration with a hypocrisy it seemed only he could see. How could he ever truly explain what it was like, realizing a box of sweets worth a year of his mother's labor could be given away by the whim of a stranger — or that Luo Binghe, head disciple of Qing Jing Peak, was closer to the leagues of those who had abused him and his mother than with the harsh life he had once thought himself destined to endure?

He could barely articulate it in his mind, much less in words. Yet he still tried.

"You cannot pick and choose who is worthy of, if not your kindness, then at the very least your respect," Luo Binghe said. "Everyone should be treated with decency. *Everyone*. That is my conclusion."

It sounded so simple when spoken plainly and without the wit Luo Binghe knew his master enjoyed. Luo Binghe grimaced at his frankness but let what was said be said. He stared back at Shizun and waited. This time, it didn't feel like he was waiting for approval, but for a challenge.

The quiet that settled between them felt as if the human realm itself was holding its breath. The breath was released with a quiet sigh when Shizun raised a hand and patted the crown of Luo Binghe's head. "What a good boy you are," he murmured. "What use is there for an old master like me when his disciple is already so mature and wise?"

His pursed lips lifted as Luo Binghe spluttered his vehement disagreement. "Binghe is right, of course. What matters in a man is not his material wealth but the content of his character." His gaze sharpened, then squinted as his smile grew. "Rich or poor, human or demon — if the heart is righteous, then the person the heart beats for must be granted courtesy."

Luo Binghe's breath hitched at the mention of demons. Despite his own secret heritage, he hadn't even thought to mention them. But their addition was deliberate on Shizun's part, he knew. It made Luo Binghe burst with love.

No matter what the future has in store, Luo Binghe thought through his haze of dizzying joy, Shizun will love me no matter who I was, am, or will become.

Momentarily distracted with this precious revelation, Luo Binghe missed the self-satisfied crease in the corner of Shen Qingqiu's eyes he tried to hide by tossing a dragon's beard candy into his mouth.

[+25 B-Points earned for furthering the Water the Sapling Passive Quest!]

Hell yeah! The combination of this passive quest and Shen Qingqiu's inner Wise Mentor quote generator was doing wonders for his B-Points score. He'd earned an extra hundred B-Points in the past week just by spouting Uncle-Ben-worthy inspirational advice and maintaining consistent eye contact with whoever was seeking his wisdom. With enough grinding and point hoarding, Shen Qingqiu might even be able to rack up enough to survive the -10,000 B-Point punishment if he didn't throw Luo Binghe down into the Abyss.

Shen Qingqiu watched Luo Binghe, who was tilting his head back with half-lidded eyes to smile unabashedly at the saturated blue sky, and hoped with all his reincarnated soul that he would.

But for now, Luo Binghe was profoundly happy. He laughed, struck with how lucky he was, and pillowed his head on his shizun's shoulder. Shen Qingqiu, for once, did not grumble at the immature display — for while it was improper, he also found Binghe's touch to be very sweet. He grinned, content. And as Shen Qingqiu quietly reveled in his disciple's warm company, Luo Binghe did the same with his master's, and together they watched the blooming meadow roll with the tide of the spring breeze.







# Much Ado About Something



### **MONDAY**

Wei Wuxian is gone from the apartment again, and it's quite late at night.

Jiang Cheng rolls his eyes and sighs.

He is determined to be more adventurous in college. He overheard his friends talking about him last week, trying to plan a party. Mianmian assumed that he wouldn't come.

This upset him. Not in a big way, but in a sore self-awareness kind of way. He thinks back on high school and realizes that he did everything as was his duty: he played sports, he got good grades, he took the right amount of honors classes — and still he ended up in the same program as his older brother, Wei Wuxian, who didn't fret half as hard (at least, outwardly).

So college will be different. He will pursue — something.

He doesn't exactly know where to begin. He makes a list of things he'd like to try, and after much rumination and embarrassment, he scrawls on a piece of paper: *crush*. It is ambiguous even to him whether he means to *have* a crush or to be the object of a crush.

Unable to contain his embarrassment, he gets up and decides to go to class early. He shares a two-bedroom suite with his brother and passes by his door on the way out. Wei Wuxian isn't there — he's probably out at lunch with friends.

When Jiang Cheng opens the door to the main hallway of the dorm, he stops. There is a bouquet of peonies in a beautiful glass vase. He raises it to his face to examine. There is no signature or note.

As quiet as a whisper, he thinks, Could it be from Wen Qing?

Wen Qing is a mutual friend of his and Wei Wuxian. He hasn't made that many friends yet and he can't imagine it'd be from anyone else. He runs the bouquet inside, places it gingerly on the counter, mumbles, "I'll be back," and then runs to class.

He is half an hour early.

### **TUESDAY**

"Hehehehee..."

Jiang Cheng looks up from his work. Wei Wuxian is giggling again in his room. Is he watching a movie for class or something?

They lived together for many years before going to college, so he's quite used to these antics, but this has been going on for an hour.

He puts in ear plugs and continues to attempt to write his essay.

"EEEEEEEEEhehhehe!"

Jiang Cheng raises his head again and yells, "Ey! Some of us are actually trying to get degrees here!"

"I'm studying too!" Wei Wuxian shouts back.

The giggling continues for yet another hour. Jiang Cheng does not, cannot believe that his brother is actually studying — unless it's a comedy film for some film class that he... isn't taking.

After writing about two pages of the essay somewhat miraculously, Jiang Cheng gets up and goes to the adjoining room. He knocks on the door. "You better not be naked in there!"

There is bustling and a crash from inside, and then Jiang Cheng hears his brother's frantic steps coming towards the door.

Wei Wuxian opens up.

Jiang Cheng folds his arms over his chest. "What the hell were you doing?"

"Uh..." Wei Wuxian scratches his head. "I was watching a movie."

"Yeah, yeah, okay. I knew it. Just keep it down. Some of us are trying to work."

"Okay," he says, smiling. "I thought you were going to be serious about not being serious though!"

Jiang Cheng scowls and leaves.

Shutting the door, Wei Wuxian turns around and whispers, "Lan Zhan, you can come out now."

A half-naked Lan Wangji opens the closet door and steps back out. "He's gone?"

"Yeah," Wei Wuxian says, beckoning him back to the bed.

"I knew we were being too loud."

"No, he only heard me, hehe!" Wei Wuxian says, winding his arms around Lan Wangji's broad shoulders. "He doesn't suspect a thing. Isn't this fun, Lan Zhan?"

"Mn."

Jiang Cheng does some more work until the hour is up. Then he goes to the kitchen to glance at the flowers again, smiling to himself.

### LAST SUNDAY

Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji officially started dating last Sunday. They were walking home from a group dinner together and finally, after what had felt like the longest courtship ever, the two kissed on the balcony overlooking the campus gardens.

Neither had planned the moment. They'd been drawn together as if by magnets, as if by the pull of time and space. It felt right. Cherry blossoms were blooming down below in the gardens. The scent of sprint wafted through the air. And they turned to each other like two pages of a book, and pressed against each other, just like that.

"Does this mean — we're boyfriend and boyfriend now, Lan Zhan?" Wei Wuxian asked, beaming.

"Mn." A simple answer, with a lot of feeling. His arms wound around Wei Wuxian's waist.

"Good," Wei Wuxian said, snuggling in even closer. The scent of spring flowers wafted through the air. "Do you mind if we keep it a secret for now, Lan Zhan?"

For a moment, he frowned. "Secret?"

"Not because I'm embarrassed!" Wei Wuxian was quick to explain. "I just think that I don't want to rock the friend group quite yet. Everyone is stressed this time of the semester and I don't want people to feel like the dynamics are shifting, you know?" His voice lowered. "Plus, it might be fun to keep this...a secret...if you know what I mean?"

Lan Wangji did know what he meant. He leaned in for a deep kiss, his hands tugging at Wei Wuxian's ponytail gently and lovingly. "Deal."

"Maybe we can keep this fun, our little secret, and as reassurances, we can send each other little gifts throughout the week?"
"Mn."

They sealed it with another kiss, just as tender and deeper this time.

### WEDNESDAY

Jiang Cheng arrives at lunch on Wednesday later than the rest of the group, so he seats himself at the corner of the table. Wen Qing and Wei Wuxian are speaking in hushed tones about something.

"What's going on?" Jiang Cheng asks.

Wen Qing scowls at Wei Wuxian and rolls her eyes.

Wei Wuxian nudges her and then picks up his chopsticks to finish his meal.

With a raised brow, Jiang Cheng repeats his question. "What's happening?"

Wei Wuxian leans towards him. "I think Wen Qing has a crush on someone."

Jiang Cheng thinks back to the flowers.

He looks at Wen Qing's annoyed and shy expression. She's scowling into her food now and nudges Wei Wuxian with considerable force.

Could Wen Qing...have a crush on me? Jiang Cheng wonders. He hasn't thought of it before. In fact, he wonders if he's slow on anything pertaining to romance.

Lan Wangji arrives and sits across from Wei Wuxian. Jiang Cheng makes room for more people at the table, knowing full well that whenever Lan Wangji is around, Wei Wuxian starts getting touchy and moves his feet around below.

### THURSDAY

"Well, I'm going to study," Lan Wangji announces to the group at dinner. He rises, picking up his bag and tray.

Like clockwork, about thirty seconds later, Wei Wuxian says, a bit too loudly, "I'm going to study too, or go for a jog. Who knows? Hahaha!"

He rises a bit too quickly and scurries after Lan Wangji.

Mianmian and Wen Qing are left there at the table, eyeing each other.

"They're totally dating, aren't they?" Wen Qing asks.

"Oh, absolutely," Mianmian says. "It's cute that they think they're capable of keeping a secret."

"Wei Wuxian's foot was running up and down my shin. I kicked him and he apologized profusely," Wen Qing says, smirking at her friend's error. "If that isn't confirmation enough, I don't know what is.

"I saw them making out in an alcove at the cafe this morning," Mianmian says. "When I approached them, Wei Wuxian saw me and flung himself far from Lan Wangji and made some excuse about how he was practicing for an acting class."

"He isn't taking an acting class."

"I know," Mianmian says, laughing. She reaches down and holds her girlfriend's hand. "I think we're much better at keeping secrets."

They also decided to keep their relationship a secret — less to not rock the friend group and more to see how long it would take everyone to realize.

"Much better," Wen Qing says, leaning in to give Mianmian a kiss on the cheek.

### FRIDAY

It's been five days since Jiang Cheng first received the bouquet (he thinks) from Wen Qing (he thinks.) The mystery has started to eat away at him. Aside from that one time at lunch, he hasn't really had contact with Wen Qing since. If

she liked him, wouldn't she show more signs of it? Wouldn't she talk to him?

Maybe he was reading too much into things. He doesn't even know if he likes her back.

He doesn't even know if he's straight.

(Actually, he is not, but he has been slow to open that conversation with himself.)

He's pacing around his dorm room when he hears some shuffling outside their door.

"Wei Wuxian!" he calls.

No answer. Wei Wuxian must be out right now.

The shuffling continues. Jiang Cheng goes to open the door.

Standing in front of him — crouching, really — is Nie Huaisang, with a vase full of flowers.

Wha-??

"Huaisang," he says, as his brain registers what's happening.

"Haha, hello!" Huaisang says, standing up and scratching his neck. He lets out a giggle. "Nothing to see here. Well, bye!"

"Wait!" Jiang Cheng catches him by the wrist, and when Huaisang's gaze raises to his own, he lets go, his cheeks burning. "Have you...have you been the one sending the flowers this week?"

"Ah..." his mouth balloons with air and he lets it out in a puff. "I'm not supposed to say anything..."

But something in Jiang Cheng's expression — curiosity, confusion, and a hint of vulnerability — makes Nie Huaisang change his mind.

"Well...your brother and Lan Wangji..."

He waits patiently.

"They...they might be...dating..."

"Oh, I know!" Jiang Cheng says.

"What??"

"I'd be surprised if no one knows at this point," Jiang Cheng says, folding his arms across his chest. "They are incapable of not doing PDA. And also, my brother talks in his sleep. The foul things I've heard..."

Nie Huaisang sighs with relief. "Oh gosh, okay! I thought I was the one who flubbed that up and-let the secret out."

"No, they totally did that on their own," Jiang Cheng says.

"Well, they wanted to keep it a secret for a bit, and asked if I could deliver flowers from one to the other to reassure each other during this time that they—"

"Ugh, okay, I got it. Thanks for explaining." His eyes drift over to the bouquet of flowers, and back to Huaisang. "Silly of me." Huaisang blinks. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, I thought...the flowers were for me." And Jiang Cheng realizes that there's a small blooming in his chest. For a small moment, he thought the flowers were from Huaisang to him...

"Oh! Do you like flowers? They're my favorite things," Huaisang says.

"I thought birds were."

Huaisang's cheeks are pink. "Flowers and birds, both. Would you want to...go to the plant nursery with me?"

"Now?"

"Or-"

"Yeah," Jiang Cheng says. "Now is good."

"Don't you have exams?"

"Yeah, but—" He remembers his resolution. "I think a break would be nice."

The two head out together. A shyness overcomes Jiang Cheng, which confuses him. "I don't have much of a green thumb."

"That's okay," Huaisang says. "It takes a while to learn about each plant. But...I can teach you!"

"No need to-"

"I'd like to teach you," Huaisang insists, and smiles. There is something about him that reminds Jiang Cheng of the flow of a stream, water rushing atop rocks. Huaisang makes everything seem easy.

"Okay," he says.

It is hard for Jiang Cheng to ask for help and harder still to accept it. This is a huge step—

And yet it doesn't feel huge. It feels safe, and nice.

They pass by Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji who are kissing in the adjacent hallway. Upon hearing their footsteps, Wei Wuxian flings far away from Lan Wangji, shouting, "HAHAHA Lan Zhan, what a funny joke!"

"Yes, I am very funny," Lan Wangji says stiffly.

"We know you're dating," Jiang Cheng says without breaking his pace. "Your flowers are at the door."

"Oh, what kind are they this time?" Wei Wuxian asks, excited.

Jiang Cheng looks over to Huaisang, who smiles back at him. "Plum blossoms."

Lan Wangji takes hold of his boyfriend's hand. "For new beginnings."

The four of them end up going to the plant nursery together, and Mianmian and Wen Qing eventually join. They talk of flower meanings, springtime, their goals for the future, and for the first time in a long time, they all feel they can let go and laugh.

### SATURDAY

"Spring is here, Lan Zhan," Wei Wuxian says, looking at the date on his phone and then clasping his boyfriend's hand.

"Mn. Do you like spring?"

"I do. It reminds me of warm childhood days in Yunmeng, but it also reminds me of change." Wei Wuxian shrugs. "I suppose that makes me worry."

"Change doesn't have to be bad," Lan Wangji says, in that simple and meaningful way he had.

Wei Wuxian squeezes his hand. "I suppose that's true. I've never seen Jiang Cheng so happy. He and Huaisang have been hanging out a lot. And just in a few months, Wen Qing came out and now has Mianmian — which, I'm pretty impressed they kept that under wraps for that long." Lan Wangji nods, agreeing. "And I — I found you."

Lan Wangji smiles a small smile. "Mn."

"And the thing about spring flowers, I guess, is that they change colors, they grow into their own, they shed, they fall..." Wei Wuxian catches a wayward cherry blossom petal. "But they always come back around. I don't think I've changed at the core of me. But I'm the happier version of me now, and so is everyone else, I think. Do you think you've changed, Lan Zhan?"

Lan Wangji, to Wei Wuxian, is a steadfast force, immovable and strong. But Lan Wangji lifts Wei Wuxian's hand to his lips, gives it a soft kiss. "Mn. I broke a rule."

"You did?"

"We broke curfew," Lan Wangji says, referring to a few days ago.

"Oh yes!" He smirks at the memory.

"And I'm about to break another one."

They are walking out in the early morning, earlier than Wei Wuxian tends to rise. Lan Wangji brings him up onto the roof of the dining hall. He ducks under the tape that they aren't supposed to pass. Wei Wuxian watches this transgression in awe, his heart growing warmer.

"The best sunrises are here," Lan Wangji explains.

They rise to the top, where the air is cool and the sky is all the pastel colors of spring. They sit there, side by side, and watch as the colors change.









### Amidst the Hellebores



Lan Wangji was born a second time after four years locked away in his Jingshi. He entered the world blinded by its hubbub, deafened by its never-ending dance of colorful sceneries, struck dumb by the muchness of it. He was unused to it; for four years everything had been dark, still, void of life yet absent death.

He was a child — reincarnated into his own body — but not a child; he was a man but not a man — the man he was died in Yiling.

They allowed him out for the first week of spring. Young grass was just breaking through the hard ground, peeking from under thin snow blankets adorning Gusu's peaks.

They did so like one releases a wounded tiger: looking out from the corner of one's eyes to catch the moment the beast might attack. Not that they believed he would turn on them, no — they trusted him that much, despite Hanguang-Jun having defended the indefensible — but in the way one keeps an eye on an awkward relative wearing a stained garment. In the way one watches something that might bring about losing face.

It had been so long since he had been allowed to step out of his Jingshi.

The room Lan Wangji sat in was similar, but after so long away from anything different, every change stood out with something close to crassness. The absence of tree branches playing at shadow theater behind the window papers; the bookshelves filled with volumes of flute music scores; a few knick-knacks here and there, similar to his own but ever so slightly off; the Sect Leader's hair crown sitting to the side rather than worn properly.

Xichen stood before him with his hair down, in regalia much less strict than he would have worn had Lan Wangji been anyone but his brother. In fact, Lan Wangji suspected that this meeting would have not taken place in the Sect Leader's quarters had he been anyone else either.

It was a sour kind of regard, more than likely earned due to the length of his enforced seclusion and his older brother's sensibilities. When Lan Wangji looked back on those years, he could only remark glibly that they went by in the blink of an eye. If it had been in his character to do so, he would have been thankful to have been spared the need to live through the immediate outcome of Wei Wuxian's death within the Five Great Sects.

"Wangji?" His brother's voice was soft as he gently nudged Lan Wangji to focus on the topic at hand.

It was good to see him. He certainly looked healthier and less harried than he had coming off the Siege of Burial Mounds. Lan Wangji remarked to himself he was now able to notice that without cold, hard anger pooling in his gut.

"Wangji will do it," he answered.

Instructor to a group of young initiates. Guiding initiates towards developing a golden core was nothing complicated as far as teaching went. The position was certainly not one that drew masses — it was usually reserved for the old or the sick, devoid of any glory. It would suit Lan Wangji fine; he had no use for glory. Nothing about his previous prestige had given him any leeway to intervene in the cultivation world's public outcry regarding Yiling.

Lan Xichen's answering smile was hopeful. And from the glint in his eye, Lan Wangji could divine the identity of one of the children that he would be tasked to guide towards the path of cultivation.

When he finally met his class, standing inside a classroom for the first time in almost a decade, he saw that he indeed still knew his brother. In the second row, eyes bright and eager to learn, sat A-Yuan. The boy had changed since the time Lan Wangji had last seen him. He wasn't covered in soot and huddling in a hollowed trunk to avoid slaughter alongside his elders, for one.

For another, Xichen had told him that the boy had been devoid of any memories after the fever had broken. Maybe that was for the best. To forget his Xian-gege and all the pain his people had suffered. At least, it was undeniably safer.

He was glad to see the child, but found himself pleasantly surprised when he walked back contentedly to the Jingshi after his first day of class. Children were straightforward. They spoke their minds, and teaching them was enjoyable. He had only headed their class for a day but they already looked at him like he had personally carved the rabbit up on the moon.

From that day on, Lan Wangji woke up every morning to walk out in the crisp spring air, crossing paths with green spring flowers peeking out from the last snows, to join with the initiates in a small but airy room. There, they worked on slowly circulating spiritual energy through their meridians and pooling it inside their dantian in hopes a golden core would form.

The children that could not manifest a golden core, Lan Wangji knew, would be sent to work in other areas of the Sect, ones they were suited for. He remembered his own class of initiates and the tears that had been shed when their teacher had announced which of the pupils would never train as cultivators.

But he did not know how to broach the subject. He himself had never doubted one second that he would develop a strong golden core. He had never felt what those failed initiates felt.

What he did understand, however, was the dismayed reaction his little class displayed the day after the foreign disciples arrived. The children whispered among themselves as they knelt down before their desks. Lan Wangji stood on the dais, a single flower laid unassumingly on his otherwise empty desk; his students eventually quieted down without him intervening, and he nodded at them proudly. More than a few of them perked up in their seats, preening.

Foreign disciples brought in their wake the aftertaste of strange dishes, strong liquors and savory meats — all foreign, all forbidden, all perversely attractive. Their restlessness, he had felt himself the first time he had seen that one boy clad in Yunmeng's purples...

Quirks of the children's lips showed flashes of small milk teeth, Lan Jingyi's excited grin revealing a pair of front bunny teeth.

The older students' arrival had brought with it disorder and unsavory rumors, but it was no longer Lan Wangji's role to care about those things. He no longer needed to chase rule-breakers on rooftops.

That the rumors concerned him did not worry Lan Wangji. The cultivation world was more gossipy than even the oldest busybodies. Nothing could keep it from flapping its lips left and right.

Lan Wangji thought of a man, standing tall against the cultivation world. Not turning back to tear at their faces even as they spit at him. He hoped he had half as much dignity as that man had displayed.

He shook his head to dislodge the memories. Lan Wangji started the class with a question. "Which, do you think, is the most important Gusu Lan rule?"

The question visibly startled the initiates. Taken aback, the children bowed their heads and snuck glances at each other.

"There is no wrong answer," he reassured them.

A female initiate spoke up, "Well, eating more than three bowls is prohibited has saved many of us from going to bed hungry."

Even though she had not mentioned Lan Jingyi's name, she had not needed to; the boy grinned, halfway contrite and halfway proud, showing off a pair of bunny teeth. "Do not be picky with food," he answered in a sing-song voice.

Lan Wangji huffed out a chuckle.

His uncle would not have suffered such an answer to be given in his class; Lan Wangji, for his part, understood those he taught were still but children.

Another boy answered. "This humble initiate likes have wins and losses."

Lan Wangji nodded. "Why do you like it?"

The class quieted down again, Jingyi craning his neck to look at the boy who had just spoken. A-Yuan was attentive as well, but less demonstratively so.

The boy bit his lip, but answered. "Have wins and losses encourages this junior to try, even if he thinks he won't succeed immediately."

"Good. Does anyone else want to share?"

A few more students gave answers, explaining what they thought was beneficial about rules.

Lan Wangji listened attentively before directing their attention to his desk. "Look at this plant. All of you have seen it before. Do you recognize it?"

A hand stretched up, high above a small head of hair. "Lan-laoshi! I do!"

Lan Wangji nodded at his student.

"It's a hellebore!" she called out proudly.

"It is," Lan Wangji confirmed. "Clumps of it grow in the back mountain, near the paths up to the peaks."

Little heads bobbed up and down.

"The rules tell us not to enter the back hills without permission. Do you know why?"

The bobbing slowly stopped to morph into a vague swaying motion.

"Does this plant look dangerous?"

A few of the more courageous initiates shook their heads.

"Hellebores should not be touched without precautions. Beauty does not indicate safety; touching these flowers can leave mortals with rashes running up to the elbows."



A boy sat in the first row shrunk away, pulling his hand back.

"Not understanding a rule does not mean that it is not right. The back mountain is a dangerous place, and this plant is only an example. Do you understand?"

Sheepishly, all the initiates agreed.

Lan Wangji glanced at the sun outside; the discussion had taken longer than he had envisioned. "Mm. Class will end here today."

He left the class with the hellebore blossom in his hand. Lan Wangji climbed up – closer to the southmost peak, high up among the clouds – where the medicine-making room of the Gusu Lan Sect was located.

"Hanguang-Jun!" a junior greeted him, smiling widely. She had been the one he had seen every time he had come to get his vulnerary since having been released. Xichen had told him she was considered a genius in medicine, and that Head Healer Lan was considering naming her his direct apprentice.

"I have come to bring it back. Thanking Lan-shimei for lending it to me." He held the hellebore out towards her, careful not to crush it.

Her bun swayed along her vigorous head nodding. "Oh! You brought it back!" she exclaimed. "This junior didn't expect you to, but thank you Hanguang-Jun." She laughed a bit, tugging wild strands of hair behind her ear. "It's always sad to see materials go to waste. Do you want me to go grab your ointment from the back room, to avoid having to come back here in a few days?"

He nodded and she dashed off to where the medicines were kept, leaving the front counter unattended. It had been many years since her master had refused to see anyone not gracing death's door, so she was the one to deal with miscellaneous tasks involving medicine delivery; she would return quickly.

And so she did, handing him a small bamboo tube with oiled paper tied around the ends. The pungent smell of medicine and hellebores wafted from it. A younger Lan Wangji would have said that it smelled of shame.

Lan Wangji slipped it in one of his sleeves and thanked her before heading out, back down the peak. Snow crunched under his boots, reminiscent of the sound firewood made when it cracked in a hearth. One cold, one hot — both soothing.

Another noise came to disturb the quiet crackle of snow; raised voices overcoming the silence along with the heady smell of liquor.

Lan Wangji stopped on the path, looking off to the side. Purple-clad disciples were sitting on hastily-wiped tree stumps, warming their hands around a fire and their bellies with alcohol.

Do not drink inside Cloud's Recesses.

Do not light a fire inside the premises.

But he was not in charge of discipline anymore. Lan Wangji did not step off the path, simply listened to the young men recalling their latest nighthunt. The Lan seniors had taken them down to the forest to deal with a colony of spirits frightening the locals.

"I understand you, brothers — but nothing brought me more joy that seeing all of Caiyi's pretty sisters waving as we headed back victorious."

The young man who had just spoken was subjected to well-deserved ribbing from his friends, calling him a lecher.

"Well, I for one look forward to becoming a hero known throughout the lands. Look at our Sect Leader Jiang! Even children here know his name."

"What are you referring to?"

"Didn't you see the children reenacting the Siege of the Burial Mounds? When we passed by the main street?"

"Oh right, I remember!"

"Me too!"

"Not that one necessarily deserves the glorious reputation one has," a snide voice spoke up.

"What are you saying, Yu Rong?"

"Well, Lan Wangji certainly wasn't part of the force that vanquished the Yiling Patriarch that day."

"He wasn't?"

The young man sneered. "See, even you don't know. No, the mighty Hanguang-Jun didn't participate in the Siege."

Lan Wangji looked down at the ointment container in his hands, unruffled at being addressed so rudely by a junior. He had indeed not taken part in the Siege against Wei Ying's home.

A sudden franticness overcame Lan Wangji and he couldn't stay there anymore, pain lancing in his back. He returned to the Jingshi. Neither the crackling of the snow underfoot nor the later crackling of the wood under fire soothed his frayed nerves. He opened the container with shaking fingers and arduously smeared some on red, angry-looking scars.

Lan Wangji chose to revisit the topic of rules a few weeks later.

He taught his class like he usually did, reading from the same texts he had been read to as a student.

But, towards the end of the class, while discussing a treaty on how to interact with civilians, he asked, "If one of you came across a hungry beggar on a night-hunt, would you give him a bowl of rice?"

All the disciples nodded.

"And then, if he was still hungry, would you give him one more?"

All of them still nodded, but some had caught on. Lan Wangji smiled gently at these troubled initiates.

"And then, if he was still hungry, would you give him one more?"

None of the disciples answered. They hunched their shoulders and glanced at each other, not daring to be the first to answer. A-Yuan was biting his lips.

Lan Jingyi and the female disciple that had recognized the hellebore were the first to nod, looking contrite. A-Yuan and others followed suit.

Lan Wangji remained silent, to the dismay of his students. He took a small bamboo tube out of his sleeve and opened it, allowing for the peculiar odor of medicine and hellebore to fill the room. Looking by their faces, all of the little ones had recognized the smell.

"Being forbidden does not mean being wicked. Poisons can be used to make medicine. Life-saving pills can kill if administered incorrectly. If you do not understand a rule, you should ask. If you do not agree with a rule, you should make a choice based on your principles. *Morality is the priority.* You are responsible for your own actions; rules are guidelines, whether



written in stone or not. We will discuss it again. Class dismissed."

It was the wrong decision to come there, Lan Wangji thought a few hours after having left his classroom.

He had entered his Sect's ancestral hall only a few minutes prior, having been summoned by his uncle to report on the initiates' progress. The sight of foreign disciples receiving discipline had not surprised him, there was nothing more common, but his passing gaze had been felt by one of the boys. Yu Rong, the one he had heard talking with his friends only a few days before.

The boy had raised his head high, inattentive to the attempts at redirection by his anxious-looking fellow troublemakers. His lips curled into an ugly sneer.

It was the wrong decision to come here.

Yu Rong looked Lan Wangji square in the eye, defiant. "Has Senior come to kneel with us?" His tone was obvious, belligerent. "This junior had been taught that the Lans do not hide away in fear, but their stellar Hanguang-Jun was so horror-stricken at the idea of fighting that Yiling Patriarch" — he spat on the ground — "that he hid away for four years. I do not know how Senior could bear to look down on us, knowing what he did."

This stopped Lan Wangji right in his tracks. He turned to face the disobedient children, shoulders cramping up in a vicious squeeze.

"How dare Senior" — the word was dripping irony — " judge us when you fled from responsibility like a coward?"

He looked at the boy whose face was progressively marred by tears, growing redder and redder as time sluggishly flowed by without any answer from Hanguang-Jun. Maybe he kept talking, screaming invectives. Lan Wangji didn't know.

Lan Wangji just looked on in a daze while other Lan cultivators shuffled from foot to foot, bowing their heads low, neither daring to raise it nor move.

"Why weren't you there?" the boy, Yu Rong, screamed, voice breaking off at the end. "Had you been there maybe..."

(Lan Wangji had screamed as well, when Lan Xichen had come to tell him about Wei Ying's death. He didn't remember if he had asked Xichen why he had gone. If he had been aware enough to articulate the pain that had flashed through him in any other way than a bestial, sepulchral cry.)

Yu Ron's eyes were red as he looked up at him. "If Hanguang-Jun had gone, maybe my mother would not have had to die."

His friends glanced fearfully at Lan Wangji and the irate Lan cultivators surrounding them, hands tightening around Yu Rong's clothes, trying to calm him down. "A-Rong! You can't talk to a senior like that!"

Another one added, "Please forgive him, Hanguang-Jun!"

Lan Wangji stayed silent.

"Oh!" Yu Rong cried. "Hanguang-Jun, so noble and strong, a hero of the Sunshot campaign! Where were you then?"

What was there to answer?

Sleeves flapping — something fell out — Lan Wangji turned and walked away. Out through the wide open gates of the place he had ordered so many to be beaten, his back burning again - like it had just been flayed open. He walked until he couldn't hear the howl of rage the mourning young man was tearing out of his throat and couldn't feel the eyes of all those present burning him.

It was the flowers that did him in. Spring was a time of rebirth. The barren lands of his soul were suddenly bathed in warm light, and the soil bore fruit. Grief sprouted alongside the magnolias; wrath was buried alongside the weeds, barely rearing its head; and shame bloomed alongside the hellebores.



What was there to answer? That the people were innocent; that he saved the man he loved; that he did what he thought was right; that the world is cold and cruel and unjust; that the sects killed many that day...

That he had been a coward?

He walked further.

What was there to answer? That he should have followed the rules; that he would not have been able to kill them; that he had been too weak; that he had seen the catastrophe approaching but had been unable to prevent it; that farm hoes made for easy cutting when faced with heroic swords; that anyone raising their swords against Wei Ying would have been met with Bichen?

His boots broke the ice underfoot, sounding like logs exploding in a brazier. One hot, one cold — both painful.

When he entered his classroom on the following day, all the children's faces were set in stone and Lan Wangji startled. Did they hear about what had happened in the ancestral hall?

They would have had to. Everyone had.

Would they despise him, knowing he had not always been the paragon of morality and justice he was known as? Would they feel betrayed, like Yu Rong and so many others? Like himself, sometimes?

Would the children be appalled? Use the strongest of Lan silent disapprovals to shame those miscreants into rueing the day they dared smear Hanguang-Jun? Retort that, had Lan Wangji been able, he would have stormed and slaughtered alongside the others?

This time he did not run away. He went to sit on his dais, silent when he usually would have greeted his pupils, and his heart twisted when A-Yuan got up. There was something clenched on his hands.

Lan Wangji exhaled and looked down at his student's offering. Inside the pudgy hand was a slightly dirty bamboo tube. It smelled of hellebores: grief and wrath and regret.

"Lan-laoshi, you dropped this yesterday. Us students were naughty and went to get it back," A-Yuan's clear voice rang.

And now, acceptance.

The children did not know what happened back then, but they believed in him. It was the naive idealism of childhood, youth-bestowed knighthoods making their milk teeth shine like polished swords. They would brandish wooden swords high and proclaim proudly the immediate censorship of any and each thing daring to exist outside of the narrow road that befit their worldview.

It was as sweet as it was sour. Tiny tyrants with even tinier hands and the tiniest open-mindedness, which he was too weak to spurn.

But they had time to learn, and he had time to teach.

And they had time to teach, and he had time to learn.







## at dawn, The knowing came

**BY FENSANDMARSHES** 



The very air seems stagnant, clinging to Jiang Cheng's shoulders like a musty, damp cloak. He shifts on the sofa. Beside him, Nie Huaisang looks up, eyes meeting his briefly before clouding back over into their usual middle-distance gaze; Jiang Cheng knows, still, that he's watching.

"What is it?" Huaisang says softly.

Jiang Cheng huffs. "Your air-conditioner is shit."

"Oh, and that's my fault, is it," Huaisang says warmly. His smile has wound its way onto his face slowly, unobtrusively, and now it sits there, lending an amicable twist to his lips; everything about Huaisang wears its own gentle smile, and Jiang Cheng leans back into the sofa with a sigh. His bones ache. Huaisang's turned slightly towards him, and he's wearing an old, ratty T-shirt and shorts rather than the cultivator's robes he insists upon donning in public; these are how he says *I don't care enough to pretend around you.* Jiang Cheng, in return, offers his sighs, his scowls, and lets himself go boneless as he melts into Huaisang's shitty old couch, makes a home of Huaisang's cheap, rattly apartment.

The conversation dies as quickly as it was born, a flame guttering out.

(Huaisang confessed, once, that he liked the rattliness, the humidity, the imperfections. Because it felt more like something he could deserve: the first failed cultivator in his family line, the boy who could not save his illustrious brother, the soft-edged child who fell from grace as the failed heir of his ancestry. Jiang Cheng had thought of his own failings, which crowded even then at the edges of his vision, lived like jabbering voices in his periphery, ran their claws over his skin like physical things —he was never quite free of failure, even when he had thrown himself so utterly into his own job that his muscles felt made of lead — and told Huaisang that he understood.)

"I've got a busy fucking week," Jiang Cheng says, by way of making conversation. He's not looking forward to it — Jiang Cheng has never been one for looking forwards. He likes to feel the present go rusty around him, to drag his fingers and teeth through the viscous stagnance that is this city, to sink deeper and deeper into rot as he waits, and waits, for a brother who will never come home. "Jin Group's saying some rogue faction wants to take over the docks as a kind of bargaining chip?"

"Ah. Yes." Huaisang clicks his tongue. It's another of his mannerisms, one Jiang Cheng knows painfully well, because the two of them are etched into each other whether they like it or not: last of their line, forever in their brothers' shadow, waiting here in this city for some metaphorical spring to come. Jiang Cheng had hated Nie Huaisang, once. Then he had run out of energy for hatred, and in that hollow space, familiarity had crept in and made its den, and something akin to affection had taken root, like dandelion bulbs that had yet to flower. "I heard about that," Huaisang says, light, airheaded, everything that used to set Jiang Cheng's teeth on edge; now it's almost a comfort. "Awful, isn't it? That they think they can just make things their own?"

"We all do that," Jiang Cheng says irritably.

"Well," Huaisang says. "At least you're state-sanctioned."

Jiang Cheng rolls his eyes. "I don't get what you're on about, half the time."

Huaisang *titters*, honest-to-the-gods, and it sends the beginnings of annoyance prickling through Jiang Cheng's blood; he hates that fucking sound. He's pretty sure it's fake — Huaisang *loves* doing that, picking up new masks at the drop of a hat and discarding them the next moment, for no reason other than the social game of it. Tricky bastard, clueless as he is.

"Well," Huaisang says airily, "tell a-Yao hello for me, the next time you see him. I would so *love* to hear how he's doing." There's a strange venom to his tone; it's easy to brush off as meaningless.

Jiang Cheng sighs. "Yeah, whatever." At that, Huaisang's smile broadens, a light, playful thing out of place in the dusty air; something glitters in his eyes. Almost makes Jiang Cheng want to look closer, as useless an endeavour as that would be. (Studying Nie Huaisang returns fuck-all results. He's made of so many layers of glitter and laughter that, Jiang Cheng supposes, he's forgotten there's supposed to be substance underneath.) As Jiang Cheng blinks, Huaisang turns away, checking his watch briefly, before drawing himself out into a long stretch. His T-shirt rides up, exposing a sliver of his round belly, its familiar curve; a second later, he catches Jiang Cheng looking and raises an eyebrow.

Jiang Cheng flushes. His phone vibrates, then; he fumbles for it in his pocket, hands made clumsy by embarrassment (and a layer of shame — Jiang Cheng knows shame like an old friend: it lives in his bones, it makes a home of his muscles, it writhes under his skin). "It's work," he says brusquely, and it is. "Something's come up."

"Ah, well," Huaisang says. His smile does not falter. "I'll see you around."

"Yeah, whatever," Jiang Cheng says, and stands, snatching up his jacket. Huaisang watches him go; when the door closes after him, Huaisang is left sitting there in the dull light, waiting. Always waiting. Jiang Cheng knows the feeling; he has to get to work.

Meng Yao meets him at the strikingly empty atrium to East Side Museum, blisteringly on time as if he's *not* the son of the father he pretends not to claim. Jiang Cheng wears street clothes and discomfort. His cultivator's robes are a shield of sorts, albeit one made of much pomp and no substance; under their subtle weight, he feels comfortable squaring his shoulders to bear them, feels as though he might have a chance at being enough. Those robes sit folded neatly on a chair

in his bedroom, probably damp by now from this stupid goddamn heatwave and its sweaty, stale air. He hadn't been home before he visited Huaisang.

The air in the atrium is sticky with humidity, and Meng Yao bustles up to him with eyes wide as saucepans. (Jiang Cheng, for his part, had had quite enough of that act after the Nie Mingjue murder case and rapidly tires of it now.) "Many apologies, cultivator Jiang," he says, "but it's urgent..."

"It's fine," Jiang Cheng barks.

Meng Yao hums. "It's a very confidential matter — I'm sure you understand." He moves briskly towards a side door marked *Security*.

A muscle jumps in Jiang Cheng's jaw; he has certain strong feelings about secrets. (Huaisang likes secrets, but only the petty kind. Jiang Cheng supposes that clause could be applied to anything Huaisang likes: revenge, games, love, all petty.) Still, Jiang Cheng has always worked to fit himself to things: he shoves himself into the boxes of his duty abrasively. He will make himself enough if it makes him bleed.

"Of course," he says crisply, following Meng Yao across the atrium.

He's led into a cramped room, thick with dust. Meng Yao ushers him into a chair, places a laptop in front of him, presses play on a security tape without any further words. Jiang Cheng's eyes flicker to the timestamp — 2AM this morning. A clear, shadowed room, empty of guards. It's utterly still. In a display case rests a lotus blossom made of opaque, flawless jade.

"Spring Flowers," Jiang Cheng says. Meng Yao nods.

A robed figure glides into frame; Jiang Cheng is painfully conscious of the absence of his own. Long, glamoured hair tumbles across the figure's back, with the signature graininess of enchantment caught on camera — it's almost familiar for a moment, half-recogniseable in silhouette. They turn towards the camera, hand-painted mask almost glowing in the gloom of the display room, and give a shallow, mocking bow.

They draw a long, rectangular object from one of their sleeves; although it's too dark to make out the details, the intricate, glowing patterns twining around it are almost beacons in the gloom. Jiang Cheng stiffens: he knows the style. Whatever the object actually is, the inscriptions — likely nigh-invisible when not in use — have made it into a seer-token, those arcane amplifiers used by cultivators exceeding themselves. Only one seerhouse in the city has the resources to create them these days. The figure sketches characters in the air with its tip, inscrutable through the video, and Jiang Cheng tenses.

Light snakes from the token and ensnares the display case; the glass shatters, and the figure picks their way unharmed through the broken shards littering the ground. Gloved, they scoop up Spring Flowers and glide back the way they came. The video ends there, whether because the clip is over or the intruder somehow cut the cameras; either way, Meng Yao reaches over and presses the screen closed, lips pursed, waiting.

"Well?" he prompts.

"I know where they enchanted the token," Jiang Cheng mutters. He feels, irrationally, guilty.

Meng Yao makes that sinuous, moulded smile. "Don't take too long," he cautions. "This artefact belongs to the Museum,

and must be found quickly."

"I know." Jiang Cheng's already out the door.

The seerhouse is a rickety place on Jianshe Road, in the southeast Chinatown of the city. A balcony curls around it like a ribbon; banners and hand-painted signs cluster like multicoloured barnacles upon its walls. A slender figure with an almost ageless face, pale-haired, stands by the narrow staircase up to the main door, and they stare directly at and through Jiang Cheng as though he is everything and nothing at once. As though they see everything about him, his rusted past and misty future and dusty, irritable present. As if they find it utterly uninteresting.

He ducks his head and squares his jaw, making his way quickly upstairs and falling into a bow that's as perfunctory as possible without being disrespectful. The seers of this place deserve his reverence and more, but he's painfully conscious of his time constraints. The seer by the door makes a noise under their breath, but moves aside. Hesitantly, Jiang Cheng rises and pushes his way through the door.

Inside, the seerhouse is thick with what looks like smoke, a thousand colours twisting together like something out of a fever dream. Here and there stand figures — seers — shrouded in the muted psychedelia, every one of their eyes fixed on Jiang Cheng. He can't see the source of the smoke, knows there is none — he has come to the seers for answers before, though he doesn't like to think about it. They are not quite cultivators, but carry the weight of a different power.

He clears his throat. "One of you," he declares, "enchanted a token on which I need information. I can sketch the sigils. It's official business—"

"Oh," comes a voice from within the haze, "a-Cheng, we know why you're here. We all remember you."

His jaw tightens. "That's irrelevant."

To his left, an old woman slips through the smoke, her hair wispy and pale, her frame stooped and slim; her eyes bore into his. "We have been waiting for you," she says clearly. Her voice resounds, striking and rich as thunder. "Don't shrink from it, child. Just listen."

The smoke spins around them. *Listen*, the room echoes. Jiang Cheng grimaces, but knows he gave up any power to dissent the moment he stepped into the room.

"The Flowers," murmurs another seer Jiang Cheng cannot see, from within a cloud of pale smoke the colour of gentians. He stiffens. "They hold the Jin glamours in place. Now they have been taken, the glamours will fall."

"There are no glamours," Jiang Cheng barks.

Listen...

"Now the city is free of them," murmurs the eldest seer, smile faint, "a storm is coming. Things are righting themselves." It feels like a threat, veiled in smoke and silk. "I would do anything for this city," Jiang Cheng says abruptly, rudely.

The seated seer murmurs, "We aren't the threat."

"So would your brother have," adds a tall, slender seer; violet smoke writhes about them. "And look how the *city* thanked him. You never served the people, a-Cheng — your job serves the glamours."

It's accusatory. Jiang Cheng bristles. "I would have done anything for *him*," he insists, raw, fierce; the smoke all around him swirls faster. Being here brings up bad memories. He can feel the energy woven through everything, glittering like

individual threads, the hazy smoke like shifting curtains. When he breathes in, he coughs.

Wreathed in smoke, he imagines, or remembers, Huaisang: one hot dusty night last year, the airconditioner rattling, eyes bright with unshed tears.

("I'm a crier," Huaisang said dismissively, but in *true* anguish he was near-silent — the tears never fell, only hovered there, like expensive pearls.) "I would have done anything for him," Huaisang had murmured to the empty room. Jiang Cheng, present, inadequate, had made a husky noise in the back of his throat — half-hearted sympathy. They were alike because they were alone. They would have done anything, but there was nothing they could do.

Jiang Cheng feels supercharged, made of lightning, a static creature. He blinks, hard, trying to ground himself in the seerhouse.

"You'll find the artefact easily enough," says the youngest seer, smiling. "Just try the place where your loved ones lie. He's waiting."

"You'd better be going, Sandu Shengshou," the eldest of the seers says, her wispy hair and wispier frame striking in their juxtaposition to her clear, sonorous voice. "You belong to the city, so listen to it."

Chills prickle their way up Jiang Cheng's arms, race down his spine. "Thank you," he says, and bows — stiff and uncoordinated, like a child. The air tastes charged, and somehow torn.

The place where your loved ones wait. That smoke, that misted voice. The cemetery's on the south side of town; he's not far, and he knows precisely who will be waiting for him.

He bolts. The hair on the back of his neck stands to attention, baby-soft, adult-weary.

Wind rumbles amongst the trees, streams through the cemetery; lightning forks across a dry horizon. Weighty clouds hurry across the sky, plunging the city into darkness, flooding it with wavery sunlight again, and between the light and the shadow is a shimmering, tearing border — the storm is some glamour, coming undone. Old trees, dusted faintly with blossom, line the fences and cast scraggly, half-hearted shadows. Jiang Cheng pauses. But there's a tugging in his gut leading him onwards, something bright and new and real, and after a moment he can't help but let it draw him in through the gates, lead him on a winding route among the graves. There is no rain, yet, but the wind has toyed with the various gifts left out; wilted petals swirl past him, stripped from day-old bouquets by the city rolling over in its grave.

Huaisang and I are alike because we are alone. Orphaned. The last of their siblings. Wei Wuxian is in hiding, out of reach. Nie Mingjue is dead, and Huaisang has wept on Jiang Cheng's shoulder about it before: no body to bury, no closure, only that stagnant omnipresent grief that can never be shaken. Lightning casts strange shadows across the city. The storm is singing. Jiang Cheng is unmoored, uncertain, and yet unafraid.

A chill of certainty is a fish-hook in his stomach and it reels him in, through the storm-tossed air patchy with cold spots and humidity, through the steady stream of leaves tearing free of their branches to play dress-up on the graves. He knows who has taken the artefact. He thinks of the venom in Huaisang's voice, the way it cradled Meng Yao's name in vitriol, and wonders why. He presses on, weaving amongst the graves, half-focused; he has given thought to Huaisang's strange furies before, but in the past had quickly lost interest, as though something prevented

his thinking about it. Disinterest, he'd supposed. Boredom. Huaisang was well known to inspire those things. Now, though — as strange half-fresh air wheels around him in a storm no-one predicted — he realises, as sun through clouds, as the dawn of spring, *There was a glamour there. It's gone now.* 

The Jin had not wanted anyone to think too hard about—

Jiang Cheng turns a corner. There, looming from the strange half-light, is a gravestone larger than life, engraved with hanzi, glowing faintly, an offering resting at its base. *Nie Mingjue*, it reads. Jiang Cheng had not known his parents and Huaisang's brother were buried in the same cemetery, under the same earth. There was a glamour over this grave: Jiang Cheng can *see* it slipping away like a fallen veil.

The offering is Spring Flowers. Of course.

"He's a little too dead to regrow." Huaisang's voice comes from behind Jiang Cheng, weighty in the way he's often not, appropriately sombre — with an edge of wry acceptance, grief dulled by time. Jiang Cheng doesn't need to turn. Huaisang draws closer anyway. Falls into place at his side. There the two of them stand. Alike in failure, in grief, in everything they never wanted to be.

"You took it," Jiang Cheng says stiffly. Above him, clouds streak past. His mind feels shrouded in seer-smoke: disoriented, hazy, but clearing slowly, leaving true wisdom in its wake.

"Everything else could use a fresh start," Huaisang says. Without looking, he places an object in Jiang Cheng's hand: a dark, closed fan, inscribed with familiar sigils.

Jiang Cheng stiffens. He recognises it from the footage; Huaisang knew damn well he would. "You did... all of this."

"Mm." Huaisang affects disinterest. Even without examining his face, Jiang Cheng knows him well enough, now, to feel its artifice like a physical touch.

His jaw works. "You knew I'd come."

"Aren't you going to try to stop me?" It's teasing, but beneath it — rooted, like dandelion bulbs, intimately familiar — is a hint of genuine hesitancy. Huaisang cares, truly, how Jiang Cheng reacts. And plenty of things have already been uprooted today.

"I think," he says, searching for the right words, "you — you might be right about the fresh starts." He clears his throat furiously. "The seers mentioned Jin glamours?"

There's an exhale from Jiang Cheng's right, breath flooding into the air like relief. Without looking, Jiang Cheng digs a reproachful elbow into Huaisang's side, relishes the offended yelp he receives in return.

The two of them stand in an empty cemetery. The wind picks up.

"Meng Yao killed my brother," Huaisang says, matter-of-fact, "and didn't want anyone to know." Jiang Cheng glances right; Huaisang's wearing the same robes as the figure from the video, but his face is exposed, shadowed, expressionless. He gazes at the grave like he's too tired to feign airheadedness. Like this, solemn, still, he is transformed. Free of glamours, Jiang Cheng supposes, magical or not.

He's always hated secrets. Huaisang, it seems, has been keeping them all his life.

"So the glamours are breaking now," Jiang Cheng says. There's a bone-deep rightness to Huaisang's accusation; it feels as though he's always known it, as though only sorcery was keeping him from stumbling upon the truth. "And the city will — will heal?"

"They had a rather adverse effect on the population," Huaisang says. He glances towards Jiang Cheng, meeting his eyes briefly, flashing a half-hearted grin. "Really you could say I saved them."

"Keep dreaming," Jiang Cheng mumbles. But he supposes Huaisang is right. "Fine. I won't—" He fumbles, and glances towards the fan now clutched in his fist. "I can say I couldn't find—"

"You found me," Huaisang says, smiling more broadly now. "I overpowered you, but you wrested my weapon from my grasp and escaped. Certainly you were very heroic."

Jiang Cheng rolls his eyes, juvenile. It feels good to indulge the pettiness; a moment later, Huaisang is giggling. There they are, two failed leftovers — Jiang Cheng can't help but huff his own laugh. Despite everything, despite his misgivings, despite the secrets, the veil draws back from his city, and he didn't really do anything at all, except place his trust in Huaisang. Who, by all accounts, does not deserve it. Who has lied to him, it seems, for years. Who is standing by his side, sharing his laughter, in the midst of a cemetery, their shared joy like sunlight breaking through the clouds.

And then it does, above them. Air flurries through the cemetery; it feels pure. Like breathing fresh air for the first time in living memory.

"Ah," Huaisang murmurs, and tilts his face to the sliver of blue sky, eyes fluttering closed.

The wind that flurries around them is a cool, almost breathtaking thing; when Jiang Cheng opens his mouth to reply, he tastes frangipani and magnolia, heady lilac, distant jasmine. "We're — not too different, in this." For all that Jiang Cheng has devoted years to a hatred of secrets, honesty is a strange and almost cruel thing to serve. The words have nested deep in his belly and put down roots, and he is tearing up clods of earth and stomach lining as he spits them out. Still he says them. "I'm sorry about your brother."

Huaisang casts a shadowed glance at the headstone behind them, then melts back into playful. (It's too late: Jiang Cheng knows a little more about the way he watches, now. Secrets for honesty. A fair trade, and Jiang Cheng can handle keeping a few.) "Let's get out of here," Huaisang says, flashing a smile. "We can talk about the rest of it later."

The trees scattered throughout the cemetery are blooming brighter now: more flowers than Jiang Cheng knows how to name. Huaisang might know; Jiang Cheng resolves to ask. He will ask more of Huaisang, he thinks, and assume less.

The two of them turn away from the cemetery. The future is waiting, after all, and the sunlight is bright.







## Three Petals for Three Poisons



"Are you sure, Wen Ning?" Wei Wuxian asks as he clutches at Wen Ning's hand. "You don't have to, you know. You could stay! I'm sure it would be okay. We would figure it out. Lan Zhan can talk to the Elders for you. They'll listen to him. They have to, you know, he's in charge! At least until Zewu-Jun is back, and he'll definitely let you stay, I'm sure of it. You... you don't have to go."

Wen Ning tries to smile at him, his face stiff as it pulls at the corners. "I'm sure," he says. "It's okay, Wei-gongzi. I want to go."

Wei Wuxian's mouth snaps shut at that, a strange watery look in his eyes. It makes something in Wen Ning waver, to question himself, to wonder if he really has to leave, only —

Only there are things Wen Ning needs to do.

"Thank you, Wei-gongzi," Wen Ning says, bowing deeply to him. Wei Wuxian makes a startled sound of protest and tries to pull him up by the elbows.

"Stop that! You don't need to — "

"And you as well, Hanguang-Jun," Wen Ning continues. "For everything you've done."

"Don't sound so final, Wen Ning," Wei Ying says, his voice thick. "It's just for now, right? It's not goodbye."

"No," Wen Ning agrees, rising from his bow. "It is not goodbye."

It has been fourteen years since Wen Ning died.

Fourteen years since he was brought back.

Fourteen years since the Burial Mounds.

It has been one year since Wei Ying called to him and Wen Ning regained control of his mind.

At first, Wen Ning had felt only confusion. It had been like a waking dream, except the dream had been dark and empty and filled with voices that whispered nothing-words to him; an eternity of being born and dying over and over again until his memories had spun away and left him blank. A story that had been unwritten.

And then, he awoke in an unfamiliar place and recognized nothing. Knew nothing. He looked out at a world twisted with darkness and buzzing with voices nobody seemed to hear and was told that this was real.

And then, the fog cleared. The world coalesced into its true shape, and Wen Ning looked around and found that, with the confusion burned away, he felt something new.

He felt angry.

He is filled with fire. His throat clenches around a blaze of words that he swallows down again and again until his belly burns.

It is why he has to go: to walk backward through the ashes of his life, turn over the coals and find where the fire lives.

The meadow grasses sway, their heavy heads bowed low, reverent at the foot of the mountain, tossing seeds in the wind.

Wen Ning catches them in his hair, memories blooming from the morass of his life before. His feet know the way, following the ghosts who walk in silence at his flank until he arrives, at last, at a lesion of pink and purple flowers that cut through the belly of the field.

They are beautiful. Bruise-colored and familiar, pale pink that ripens into a purple so dark it is nearly black. He kneels, his knees landing in the dip of his memory, his hands hot with shame where he held Wei Ying down, golden light spilling out of him to burn a scar of flowers into the land.

He thought then that, for all the horror of what they were doing, it was right. He thought that, when Wei Ying asked for things, it was right to give them to him.

He was wrong. He sees now that Wei Ying will ask for things that hurt him. That Wen Ning will, again and again, answer the call to destruction with a heart filled with love so blind and boiling that it could spill over and leave wounds that Wei Ying will hide away, a cat slinking off to lick them in the dark.

Wen Ning presses his hands into the ground where they ripped Wei Ying in two, flowers crushed beneath his palms. He does not sigh or breathe deeply around the shame that hollows him out. He does not have breath to give to sadness. Instead, he plucks a purple flower with a promise. He was ignorant, then, to think the price of sacrifice was Wei Ying's alone to pay. He has learned better. He has learned that joy can not be snatched back from an altar of penance; there is no sneaking into the temple to steal away an offering already claimed.

Wen Ning holds the flower gently and promises to remember.

Wen Ning continues on his journey, the purple iris stored carefully in his sleeve pressed between the folds of a talisman that Wei Ying gave to him before his departure.

"In case you run into any trouble," he'd said, without further explanation.

Wen Ning treasures the sentiment the talisman represents, the love expressed through cinnabar, and knows he will not use it.

He passes through Yiling. The town has hardly changed over the years. Still dusty. Still filled with hard people wearing the thick face of poverty and hardship. And yet, life goes on. Bright, burbling laughter spills from the mouth of an alley. A young woman as gray as stone leans against the wall, a small child grabbing fistfuls of her hair and giggling as he shoves them into his mouth.

Outside of Yiling, as he makes his way toward the looming black mountain beyond, the world sounds different: the air grows thick with whispered pleas and dead faces shimmer in the air, and Wen Ning finds himself wishing he wasn't making this particular trip alone.

The Burial Mounds welcome him home with eager hands that slip over his skin like smoke, breaking apart into empty air. They speak to him, their voices percussing against him, their pleas filling him like the hollow of a drum. The resentful energy that holds him together answers back, a counterbeat of equal longing.

At the top of the mountain, where once their shabby homes had nestled shoulder-to-shoulder for warmth in the dark, there is nothing. Only blackened shadows burnt into stone where once Granny Wen and A-Yuan had shared a bed of straw. Only empty rows of ash where once they had labored in the rocky soil, bidding radish crops to grow.

The resentment churns around him as he stands amongst the ruins where his family had scraped together the pieces of themselves and tried to coax the world into something gentler.

The world doesn't want to be changed, though. In asking the Burial Mounds for gentleness, the world for mercy, they had asked too much. Wen Ning had escaped death and accepted the parcel of happiness that remained for him. He was given more than he could have hoped for. More than he could keep.

He has A-Yuan. He has Wei Ying. It is enough.

It is enough.

Wen Ning approaches the mouth of Demon Subduing Palace, dust clutching at the hem of his robes as though it could drag him back into the grave. Outside the mouth of the cave, he sees them — floating in the pool of cleansed water, bright beacons in the gray world, are the white petals of a dozen lotus flowers.

That night, Wen Ning stays in the Burial Mounds, sitting at the edge of the pool. He does not sleep — he never sleeps — but he listens to the spirits that call the place home as they speak to him even in death of the ache in their stomachs and their hunger.

In the morning, he wades into the lotus pool and plucks several plants out by the roots, taking a bag from his pack

and placing them inside.

Back down the mountain, he finds his way to Yiling, his robe collar pulled high around his throat, his hat tilted low over his eyes.

He finds them quickly.

On a corner, in coarse robes wearing thin around the elbows, is the young woman bouncing the baby on her knee. Her dark hair is tied back tightly, more practical than elegant, a few stray strands tucked behind her ears as the baby grabs at them.

She looks up as Wen Ning approaches, her eyes sharp and bright, even narrowed as they are with distrust. She shifts, bringing the child closer to her chest. "He's coming back," she says, sharp and proud.

Wen Ning stops a safe distance away so as not to scare her. Slowly, he reaches into his bag and withdraws the lotus plants, the roots wrapped in a damp cloth for safekeeping. "Put them in the water," Wen Ning says. "They're strong, and the seeds are sweet. They'll grow almost anywhere."

The woman says nothing as he places them on the ground between them. Wen Ning considers, then bends low again and plucks a single flower head and places it in his pocket before he rises and walks away.

The wind whips over Qiongqi Path as Wen Ning stares down at the now empty valley, green and yellow where the weeds feed on the bodies of his people and the men who murdered them. The grass waves to him, like a friend beckoning from a distance; like family calling him home to rest his head beneath the earth, held snug by the roots of hungry flowers.

The sun burns. The tops of flower heads brown beneath it, and their thorny stalks catch on Wen Ning's robes as he makes his way through the path, clutching at him like beggars. He feels nothing as they snag on the skin of his ankles and tear at him.

He has nothing to give them. Wen Ning cannot bid the sun to burn less hotly, nor ask the clouds for cover. He cannot summon water to quench the drooping flower's thirst.

Instead, he sits, their sun-crisp petals crunching into fragile ash beneath him.

Around him, the valley buzzes with summer insects drawn forth as the sun makes its slow arc and burns orange light into the western edge of the sky. Inside his chest, Wen Ning feels an answer to the blazing horizon, an answer to the chill of the evening breeze, and then... nothing.

Beneath the darkening sky, amidst the bugs and wilting flowers, atop remains of lost kin, Wen Ning finds himself in a world with no place for him. The dead rest and the living live, and Wen Ning... Wen Ning sits in the valley where he died and finds the root of his fire.

It is here, in this place where his light went out, where he laid down with family and thought that at least there was peace at the end of violence.

But then. But then there was darkness that tore into the wound in his chest, that clawed its way in and made space and spread its cold roots through him. It gouged black rivers into him, poured out of him, and in the end there was no peace. He woke, and his sister embraced him, cried into his shoulder as he wrapped his arms around her, and he told himself that this was worth it. But Wen Ning was a blade, and the tighter Wen Qing held him, the deeper he cut her.

Wen Ning is angry. He lies back as dark spills into the sky and, as though he can slice his arms through time and

paddle backward like a boat in water, Wen Ning closes his eyes and imagines a different world. A world where he had fallen to the ground in this spot and never moved again. A world where Wei Ying had not pulled him back and run resentment along his edges like a whetstone along a knife.



He doesn't know how long he lies there. Long enough for grass to curve between his fingers in a bid for light? Long enough for him to sink into the earth and for the flower seeds to send weak-fingered roots into the ground before raising red faces to the sun like flowers over a grave?

It is light when he hears the approach of soft footsteps that stop just at his side, and still, Wen Ning lies a little longer. "Ning-shushu?"

Wen Ning opens his eyes to find Lan Sizhui kneeling next to him. "Sizhui," he says, attempting to smile at the young man. "I've told you. Call me 'qianbei'."

"Of course, Qianbei," Lan Sizhui says, returning his smile gently.

Wen Ning sits up, looking around himself at the valley. It is daylight again. The sun feels softer today, the wind quieter. The fields are full with blooms of shimmering red.

"Why did you want to meet here, Qianbei?" Lan Sizhui asks, looking out and seeing the emptiness that stretches around them.

"There are spirits here who need to rest," Wen Ning says. "What do you remember?"



That night, as Lan Sizhui sleeps, Wen Ning slips away deeper into the valley. They had done good work that day, turning stones and playing music for the dead as Wen Ning told A-Yuan stories. A-Yuan doesn't remember this place, but Wen Ning remembers every moment of it; his memory is an undying thing that clings to the scraps of his life like a hungry dog, unwilling to let a single color or sound spill wasted through the cracks.

So Wen Ning told him of how Wen Popo had tied him to her back. Of how he had woven him a hat of grass to shield him from the sun. Of how Uncle Four used to tell him stories when he cried. He did not tell him that Wen Popo would hide him beneath her robes when guards got too close, or how fear lanced their hearts whenever he cried for fear of what those guards might do.

He told Lan Sizhui stories of how he was loved before he was a Lan. Of the little boy who was a Wen and how, to his family, he was sunlight that filled them with color and hope back when these fields were only gray.

Wen Ning walks deeper and deeper into the valley until, suddenly, he stops, having reached the place that burns the hottest. Here, in the dip between two hills, is a low wide bowl in the land overflowing with dark red azaleas that ripple like liquid in the mountain wind.

This, he knows, was the place that it started. The place where Wen Ning died.

He wades in, letting the flowers catch his hands and drag the anger out of him.

He died here. But this is also the place where his family took an orphaned boy, knit themselves tight around him,

and saved him. Their love had been enough, had left behind prints deep enough for others to find and step into when they were gone.

"What do you have in your hands, Qianbei?"

"I found some flowers in the fields. Would you like one?"

There are people in Dafan, again.

They are unfamiliar people. There are no noses he recognizes, or smiles that tug higher on the left side the way A-Yuan's does.

Lan Sizhui goes to find them a room, Wen Ning opting to walk the market — it will be easier for him to find a room for a good price without Wen Ning there.

It is a small village, nothing like he remembers. Or perhaps it only seemed big to him when he was a child. Maybe it only seems small when people turn down alleys and press themselves into shop doors as Wen Ning passes.

His eyes drift over the village, and he does not realize what he is looking for until his eyes snag on a string of familiar characters on a book in a shop display. His feet carry him forward and he finds himself in the store, a book of medicine in his hands.

"How much is this?" he asks, tracing a finger over the lines,

The shopkeeper looks at him — his eyes linger on the black veins that vine up his neck and on the bloodless lily pallor of his skin. The left edge of his mouth twitches, an echo of a smile. "Take it," he says. "No cost."

That night, as Lan Sizhui sleeps, Wen Ning sits in the dark and reads. The words are stiff and pointed and prick like thorns behind his eyes. Or, perhaps, like shining silver needles.

As the night begins to thin to a gray trickle through the slatted shutters, as Lan Sizhui stirs, Wen Ning takes each flower he carries with him and tucks them between the pages of the book with a promise to remember.









## a gift of spring, a gift of time

**BY SHEILA** 



Through the winter, offerings at Puqi Shrine steadily dwindle. Xie Lian expected it, really. The harvest hasn't been kind and the villagers need to think of themselves first. He doesn't mind; his San Lang's faith is more than enough to keep him at full power. Besides, he's glad to see them prioritising their own welfare. He takes it as a sign they aren't scared of him abandoning them.

Xie Lian spends most of the winter in Ghost City, pampered and spoiled by the warmth of Paradise Manor. The ghosts don't mind the cold, but even so, they happily set up wares with furs of...questionable origin for everyone to enjoy. Days pass in a gentle quiet, a soft sleepiness lingering on the air. For once, Xie Lian finds himself able to appreciate it. He spends long hours in the crisp air, relishing in having food and shelter. He walks along the stalks or sits in their garden, marvelling at his luck, and each day Hua Cheng places a soft coat over his shoulders. Somehow, he always only realizes those things looking back on them. How long has it been since he didn't have to worry about winter? Since he could walk into the streets and not worry about being able to find a place to rest from the chill?

Lost in the lively atmosphere, Xie Lian doesn't see much of Puqi residents. When he does — cleaning the shrine or collecting scraps — they're tired and pale, skin sunken from hunger and the biting cold. Still as kind as ever, though. Sometimes people change when the circumstances are tough, he knows that better than anyone. Seeing that *not* be the

case is a relief, especially with how helpless Xie Lian feels every time he sees them. He's grateful for the husband he can confide in. Hua Cheng listens as he always does, attentive when Xie Lian speaks and quick to take his mind off things.

As always in winter, the prayers all take a similar tone. The villagers don't ask for much. For what they do request, though, Xie Lian can do little. Despite everything, he is, at his core, a martial god. He can't make the spring come quicker or the days grow warmer. And he's not that naive youth who thought a single action could stop an avalanche either. He mentions it once, when one of the farmers asks how he is as he's cleaning the shrine.

"I wish I could do more" he says. He feels a bit guilty, knowing that as soon as he's done, he'll go back home to warmth and food, and they will have to stay in the cold. The farmer laughs his worries off, though.

"Your Xiao Hua sneaked us more firewood again, thinking we won't notice. This is nothing, daozhang; You should've seen the winter five years ago! It didn't let off until it was nearly summertime!"

The talk with the farmer, combined with Hua Cheng's efforts, does make him feel better. He makes sure to shower his husband with kisses upon his return too. Hua Cheng deserves to know how much he's appreciated.

Luckily, as harsh as it is, the winter can't last forever, although it toys with them on its dying breath. The weather turns warm and flowers bloom, only to be sized by ice again, leaving them weak. Each time it's a little less severe and slowly but surely, Xie Lian watches the world wake up again. The villagers leave their homes more often, exhaustion on their faces slowly giving way to hope. Xie Lian spends that time fixing up the shrine, or — more often than not — admiring Hua Cheng as he works. Each time he catches himself idling around, he makes a solemn promise to Ruoye not to get distracted anymore. Then, inevitably, fails again.

The first thing about this spring that stands out to him happens before the ice fully melts the first time around. As it takes place, Xie Lian is too distracted to notice the slight twitch Hua Cheng gives seeing the offering.

It happens on a cold morning, after a rare night spent at Puqi, so early Xie Lian practically has to drag his husband out of bed. Luckily, a promise of kisses always helps. He deposits Hua Cheng in charge of breakfast while he goes around preparing the shrine for the day. They don't have to wait long for the first worshipper either.

It's a tall, willowy girl with sunken cheeks and red-rimmed eyes. She greets Xie Lian with familiarity and it takes him an embarrassing amount of time to recognize her as a resident of a close-by village. Worried, he hovers in the distance as she offers her prayers. She asks for the safe return of her fiancé, a quiet voice in Xie Lian's mind lamaneting about the blocked roads that kept him from returning. There's little hope in her tone but Xie Lian — Xie Lian feels a burst of energy, excited to receive a prayer he can actually answer. Ages have passed since he felt useful.

He only really notices her offering once she gets ready to leave. There are flowers on the altar: tiny, pale little things. They're quite pitiful, halfway to wilting, looking as if somebody stomped on them.

Xie Lian pauses at that thought. His mind drifts back to his darkest days, pulling the memories to the forefront against his will. Xie Lian shudders, pulling his robes tighter around himself. With several deep breaths, he almost manages to convince himself he's alright. Almost.

"Gege?"

"San Lang," Xie Lian says, feeling his heart breaking into a million pieces before slotting back in place in the shape of Hua Cheng's name. "I love you"

Hua Cheng's reply comes instantly, without hesitation. His voice is soft, still worried, but full of endless adoration

that makes Xie Lian's breath catch. "I love you too. Is something wrong?"

"I just wanted to make sure you knew."

"Thank you, gege," Hua Cheng breathes, caressing
Xie Lian's cheek. He makes no objection, even though he
must know it's not that easy. It sends another stake through Xie
Lian's heart. "Tell me if you need me, okay?"

"I will."

Reassured, Xie Lian approaches the girl. She greets him with exhaustion barely concealed behind her respect.

"Those are nice flowers," he tells her. Then, fearing he sounds insincere, "For this season"

She smiles good-heartedly, saving him face. Her voice is quiet, rough from time spent crying. "We don't have much else, unfortunately. After this winter..." She shakes her head. "I figured these would be alright, for the Flower-Crowned God"

"They're more than enough," Xie Lian assures her. He doesn't think of Wuming, of the adorned temples in Xian Le. If he allowed himself that, he'd break down on the spot.

Instead, he bids the girl farewell and curls up in Hua Cheng's lap, allowing himself to be fed. They don't talk about it that day; they don't talk about much at all. Hua Cheng spends it petting Xie Lian's hair and humming his mother's lullaby until he calms.

Then, in as few words as possible, Xie Lian relays the girl's prayer. Hua Cheng listens attentively. Guilt spikes in Xie Lian's chest at omitting the truth — but they both know he's not ready to talk yet. So they leave it be, and leave for their search. Xie Lian asks Hua Cheng not to use his butterflies, eager to be able to rely on his own abilities to help. They find the fiancé a week later, holed up halfway to Puqi, in a village where winter hasn't loosened its clutches yet. It's easy enough to get him back home.

The excitement of the search quickly wipes the memories from his mind, though Xie Lian knows full well they'll be back.

"Gege," says Hua Cheng one day when Xie Lian is busy admiring the first blooming bud next to the shrine. It's a small, wispy thing, and the wind whips against it like the flower's offended it. It makes Xie Lian wonder what the Wind Master is up to these days. He's gotten no message, no letter from them throughout the winter. Have they found a safe haven against the cold? Has the spring reached the capital yet? He'll need to visit them soon, it's really been too long.

That "Gege" reaches him again, closer, softer, like a puff of warm air in his face.

"San Lang," Xie Lian replies. Without turning, he glances at his husband out of the corner of his eye. Hua Cheng is already looking at him, a gentle, concerned smile on his face. Despite calling him, he doesn't follow up with anything, only drapes a soft coat over Xie Lian's shoulders, like he always does. Xie Lian sinks into the warmth, slumping against Hua Cheng's side. He didn't even notice how cold he was until now. But of course, his San Lang knew.

With a sigh, Xie Lian returns to observing the blossom. Lately, he's got moments like this, when he's feeling... empty

isn't quite right. Melancholy, maybe? Xie Lian has never allowed himself to think much about the past but recently, his mind keeps drifting back to Wuming whenever he's not busy. He's not sure how to breach this topic to Hua Cheng. What could he even say?

Hua Cheng throws an arm over him, long fingers sinking into his hair. He massages Xie Lian's scalp in small circles, humming softly.

"San Lang," Xie Lian says again, eventually, taking comfort in Hua Cheng's presence. He loathes to break the mood, but there are things that must be said, even though he hopes that San Lang is already aware of them. "Thank you for being here"

"There's nowhere else I'd rather be," Hua Cheng replies with no hesitation. So precious, so sweet. Xie Lian's heart skips a beat at the tenderness. Sometimes, it feels like he could never deserve this. He sneaks under Hua Cheng's arm, burying his face in his chest.

"After everything I've done to you," he murmurs into the soft fur. It's not a question; he's got no doubt of Hua Cheng's devotion. It's more of a perpetual sense of wonder; how lucky he is to have found somebody who loves as easily as Hua Cheng does.

"That day, in Yong'An... it really was you."

Hua Cheng hesitates, swallowing thickly after producing merely a syllable. When he speaks, his voice is a whisper, "I wanted gege to know... that you still had believers left in the world. That you weren't only scorned."

"I was a fool- No, let me speak. I was a *fool*, San Lang. I was blind, and I thought I was alone. I thought you were taunting me. Later, I... San Lang, I was so scared of disappointing people again, so scared that whoever left it would hate what I'd become..."

Hua Cheng presses a kiss on the crown of his head, forceful and so full of feeling Xie Lian nearly chokes on it. He takes a breath, inhaling the incense smoke that clings to Hua Cheng's robes. Holds it in his lungs for a long moment, thinking about all the ways he could've lost his love forever. He steps back on the exhale, raising his head so Hua Cheng can cradle it in his hands. His face must be teary and blotchy, but it doesn't stop Hua Cheng from peppering it with kisses, again and again until Xie Lian regains the strength to speak.

"But I know better now," he breathes. "No matter how much San Lang suffered, he never left. It means more than I can say."

"Gege made it all worth it," Hua Cheng replies with a kiss to Xie Lian's forehead.

"And now I'm back here, with power to make a change again, being worshipped again, thanks to San Lang."

"No. Gege is extraordinary. They'd worship gege even if your shackles never broke."

"San Lang broke them. And you misunderstand, my love. It's thanks to San Lang that I want to try."

Hua Cheng makes a sound like a breath hitching, eye shiny. He looks away for Xie Lian, blinking rapidly, hand pressed to his mouth. Xie Lian's heart floods with warmth at the sight, and fondness so strong he fears he might melt right then and there.

"I'll just have to tell San Lang more often," he teases, "so there's no doubt in his mind."

The talk with Hua Cheng eases Xie Lian's anxiety, and he returns to his daily tasks with newfound peace. There's more to be said, but Xie Lian delights in the knowledge they have forever to talk things out. It's a strange feeling, to feel secure in his future for once. Xie Lian thought he knew it from his teenage years. It isn't the same at all though.

Back then, his every comfort was planned. Xie Lian did little to earn it. Everything he got came from his birthright. With San Lang however, he knows it's his — their — very being that keeps them together.



With time, Xie Lian notices more and more people leave flowers on the altar. Some of them are even feebler than what the girl grew at first, barely recognizable as a plant. They grow in numbers steadily though, a bit softer, a bit more vibrant, until one day Xie Lian wakes up convinced he's in a Xian Le temple of old. It's the sight of his husband happily arranging the offerings that pulls him back into the reality, calming his wild heart. Upon looking closer, he realizes the flowers are nowhere near the grandiosity of those that once adorned his temples. They're little things, barely out of buds, with floppy, discoloured petals. The kind of weak that the royal palace would punish a servant for. Too ugly to adorn the royal halls, never mention a temple of the Crown Prince.

Xie Lian can appreciate beauty, and had probably paid too much attention to it in his youth. But even remembering all the riches of his youth, there's only one thing more beautiful than these feeble blooms: his husband, who was the first to gift him one of those. Not even his looks, but all that he represents, all that he is. It's a new kind of comfort to realize that — even if he changed, and no matter how much he'll change still, there won't ever be another moment when his altar is empty. Not a year spent alone, not another comfort passing by or luxury regretted in hindsight for the rest of his life. For the first time in centuries, he's safe, with no worries on his mind but those of others. He's in a position where he can help without losing himself. And it's all thanks to this wonderful man, so eager to give and never asking anything in return.

"San Lang" he says, voice welled up with emotion. "I love you." The words are nowhere close to expressing all that he feels, but if he stays quiet another moment, he'll simply burst.

Hua Cheng looks up from the altar with the softest smile on his face. He reaches out towards Xie Lian. On his hand lies a little white flower, just as delicate as the others. Xie Lian cups it between their palms, pulling Hua Cheng into an embrace at the same time. He's careful not to crush it; it is, after all, his favourite.

"I love you too, gege." Hua Cheng laughs, soft and quiet, peppering butterfly kisses on Xie Lian's cheeks, turning his head this way and that way with a gentle hand on his chin.

Later that day, Xie Lian is pulled aside by one of the village aunties. She's a poor one, her whole family sickly. That never discouraged her, though. She's lively and headstrong, making Xie Lian think she survives on spite alone.

Like nearly all others did, she apologizes for how meager her offering is. "I'd bring some food," she sighs, patting Xie Lian's hand, "but my son is still bedridden and I can't carry much myself."

"You need it more," Xie Lian assures her. "Besides, I.. ah, I've come to realize I actually prefer these." He plays with the stem of a blueish flower, a kind that didn't grow in Xian Le.

"Oh?" she smiles, eyebrow arched in a hint of mischief many would think unbecoming of her age.

"I try not to be picky, but it's true a few years ago I would definitely have appreciated food more. I wasn't in a good place back then," he admits, eyes crinkling from his smile. Pride swells in his chest when the words leave his mouth. Not that long ago, he'd insist everything was fine. It wasn't, and while he doesn't regret how he spent all those centuries, he's glad he's matured enough to move past the denial. It's freeing, to be able to look at the past and see it from all sides.

"What changed?" she says, a sly note in her tone, like she already knows the answer.

Xie Lian huffs a laugh, looking back towards where Hua Cheng is happily stirring soup, San Lang's signature ponytail swishing as he moves. He thinks of Hong'er, alone in an abandoned shrine, unafraid to argue with the only god he cares about. He thinks of Wuming, desperate to remind Xie Lian he's cared for and that he suffered for it by Xie Lian's own hand. He thinks how after, Hua Cheng never gifted him a flower again until the common people did, until he was sure it was welcome.

"These days, I am... provided for. I have food and shelter, and if I didn't, I know San Lang would drop everything to help." He fights the blush as he speaks, knowing it's a losing battle. At the same time, the words jump onto his tongue themselves, eager to be out in the world. He can't blame them. "A flower is the first gift he gave me. It's one of my earliest memories of him... It gave us both hope, strength, when we needed it — though I'm ashamed to admit I didn't realize it in time"

The old woman hums knowingly, following his line of sight. "He sounds like an incredible husband! Gods know mine didn't inspire poetics in me!"

"He is. He always believed in me, even when I lost my way. So the fact that so many believe even though there's little I can do is more than enough," Xie Lian sighs. Then his words catch up to him and he stammers, blood rushing to his face. "Be- besides! I want people to know I'll help no matter what! Nobody should worry about their prayer being discarded just because they didn't have enough!"

The auntie only laughs good-naturedly at this, and leaves soon after with well-wishes, leaving him to stew in his embarrassment. He doesn't realize he basically slipped he's the god until well after she's gone.

"It's alright, gege" Hua Cheng tells him that evening, "she won't tell anybody. At that age, she can understand wanting to live in peace. And if she realized gege is a god, she knows how long you've been around. That you deserve rest. She wouldn't do that to you." His voice full of laughter, contrasting with the blush on his face. It hadn't receded since he heard Xie Lian's words earlier. For his part, Xie Lian can't help reaching out every minute to caress it.

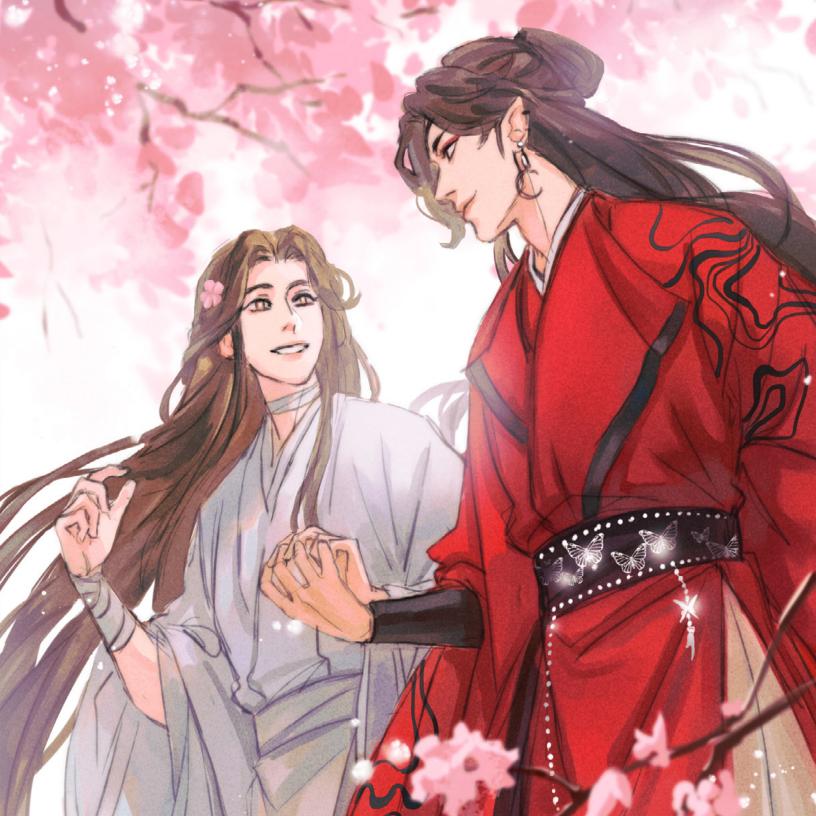
"I suppose... But, ah, I still can't believe San Lang heard all of that!" He writhes in the bed, hiding his face in his hands.

Cold fingers immediately pry his wrist away, gentle and devout. Hua Cheng leans down to press a kiss into his palm, whispering into the skin, "Even if gege didn't say any of that, this San Lang already knew. It's the same for me"

"Impossible," Xie Lian grins, eager for an opportunity to tease back and forget his embarrassment. "I've never given San Lang flowers."

"Gege..."

Xie Lian looks at him with all the seriousness he can muster, chest shaking from holding back laughter. "I plan to fix that first thing in the morning. Be ready."







"I thought I told you to run." Mu Qing shoves him away. "Run."

He's on his hands and knees. The shove is weak and one-handed. The grass is starting to stain with blood, and his zhanmadao lies on the ground, its hilt shining red as the blade reflects the blinding afternoon sun.

Run.

As if Feng Xin would run without him.

"Why do you insist on being so fucking stubborn?" Feng Xin huffs, slapping Mu Qing's hand away.

"Because otherwise, we're both —" The cough that wracks Mu Qing's chest rattles Feng Xin's bones. It coats Mu Qing's lips a startling shade of crimson.

Yet, being the ever-pain-in-the-ass, he still manages to raise his arms to push Feng Xin away again.

Feng Xin knows how the sentence was going to end; if he didn't leave now, they could both end up dead. But what does Mu Qing take him for? A coward?

He thought they were past this.

He's also going to kill Quan Yizhen for getting them into this mess. Outside their territories and against a creature that fed on spiritual power, they might as well be walking to their deaths.

"I'm not leaving you," Feng Xin snaps. "Stop wasting time and being so goddamn difficult. You're a shit martyr, and frankly, it doesn't suit you."

Another cough shakes Mu Qing's chest before he can reply. A pained whine follows the horrid sound as he falls forward, fingers curling to resemble claws as they dig into the earth.

Feng Xin barely has a second to register what he's seeing. On the backs of Mu Qing's hands, black lines start to creep out from underneath his vambraces. The marks sear themselves into his skin, leaving a dusted trail of embers as they burn through the spiritual power that usually kept them hidden.

Feng Xin can't remember a time when Mu Qing hadn't kept his soulmate marks hidden. The man had a cursed shackle on, and he *still* refused to let them show. The fact they're starting now proves how much power he's lost.

"Mu Qing," he starts, and it's the second time in eight hundred years that he's said the name with genuine fear.

Feng Xin's throat is dry. His chest feels bound by a rope that scratches and digs into his rib cage.

"Did... Mu Qing fall?"

The words are scorched into his memory, like his nerves will never forget the way the lava's heat had singed his skin.

The thoughts cut off. There's a whisper in the air, like the final exhale passing through parted lips. It makes the hair on the back of Feng Xin's neck stand on end. It's the same sound he'd heard when he'd walked into the clearing to find Mu Qing fallen on his knees, sabre loosely held at his side as the creature fed on his spiritual power.

"Fuck. Mu Qing, work with me," Feng Xin snaps, pushing out the mental image. "I'm not leaving, so you can either help me, or kill us both."

Panic eats away at the frustration. He's even further away from his own territory, and he knows he doesn't have enough strength left to fight the creature again.

As much as he loathes to admit it, they'll need Crimson Rain to deal with this.

But Feng Xin is willing to lose his pride only as long as Mu Qing survives this.

Mu Qing coughs again, and blood splatters the ground. He whimpers when he sees it coat his hands.

Thin black marks encroach from his hairline to form designs around his temples. Feng Xin knows he doesn't have the right to look at them. Not like this, not when they're showing up involuntarily because Mu Qing is bleeding his strength and life out into the dirt.

"You're so stupid," Mu Qing says, but his eyes betray the visceral plea as he reaches out.

His hands are slick with blood when Feng Xin grabs them. He slings Mu Qing's arms over his shoulders and maneuvers him onto his back.

Feng Xin's plan is to get Mu Qing back to a temple in the southwest. It would be the most effective place in the mortal realm to replenish his spiritual power and heal his wounds. But on the rare occasion they've had to do this, Mu Qing had held on, supported what he could of his weight, even if he was hissing and spitting about being given a piggyback ride.

This time, he says nothing. His grip is loose, and his body is hardly more than dead weight as it slumps against Feng Xin's back. Time isn't on their side.

"Feng Xin."

His name is softly whispered into the crook of his neck.

He makes a split second decision. He prays it's going to be the right one.

"You're going to be fine. We're almost there," Feng Xin interrupts, refusing to hear what Mu Qing was going to say.

Mu Qing hums, but it's more placating than an actual agreement. "Look...whatever happens... don't look at my marks. Please."

"Are you fucking kidding me?! You're worried about *that* right now? How the fuck is that your pri—" He doesn't get to finish the sentence because Mu Qing's grip completely loosens, his body slides to the side.

Feng Xin had been holding Mu Qing's legs, supporting his weight.

It means his grip is wrong.

It means Mu Qing falls, and Feng Xin can't catch him.

It's unfortunate because if it was any other time, for any other reason, Feng Xin would have laughed.

There's a loud bang on the shrine's door. It rattles the hinges and disturbs the birds that were perched on the windowsill.

Xie Lian looks up from the prayer scroll he'd been reading.

"How intrusive," Hua Cheng says, from where he's washing dishes. "Do you want me to get that, Gege?"

"No, I've got it," Xie Lian says, climbing out from his seat and walking to the door.

He's unsure what he's expecting as he reaches for the handle. Most worshippers and visitors don't arrive with a crash. He doesn't sense a killing intent, nor does he sense a strong amount of spiritual power, plus San Lang seems fairly unbothered from his spot at the sink.

He opens the door.

"Diànxià." It's quiet, barely above a whisper, but it ricochets like a cry.

It takes Xie Lian a moment to register what he's seeing.

"Feng Xin?"

His friend looks like he's about to collapse. Long strands of hair fall around his face, the lion-faced armour that usually sits on his shoulders is gone. His golden eyes are fierce and wild, the pupils nothing but pinpricks. The thin black lines of his soulmate marks curl up from the neckline of his robes, over his throat, and along his hairline, creating a dizzying and delicate design of roses, hydrangeas and lavender.

Growing up, Feng Xin had never cared about the marks — never made an effort to hide them or flaunt them. He wore them with the same matter-of-fact honesty as if it were a part of him in the same way his hair was dark brown. In the beginning, his duty outranked any desire for love.

While Xie Lian is confident his view hasn't changed, it was common practice for gods to hide the marks. Most of

them have outlived their soulmates, and they liked to keep the marks hidden from their believers to enforce that degree of separation between them. The last thing they wanted was worshippers thinking they matched their gods.

So, the fact they're on display and that Xie Lian doesn't sense a large amount of spiritual power are the first signs that something is terribly wrong.

The next thing that Xie Lian takes in is the body draped over Feng Xin's shoulders. A curtain of long black hair obscures the person's face, but Xie Lian still recognizes the black and red robes, although the signature shoulder armour is also missing, probably removed to make carrying him easier.

Xie Lian doesn't ask. Instead, he opens the door wider to let them in.

Don't look at my marks. Please.

Please.

Please.

Since when does Mu Qing ever say 'please'?

Feng Xin scrubs his hands in the river behind the shrine.

His robes are stiff with blood. It's in his hair, under his nails.

Seconds. That's all it took for Hua Cheng to destroy the creature. Feng Xin had walked with him down the path, one of his spiritual arrows in his hand like a piece of bait.

As predicted, the creature burst out from the trees on all fours; ravenous, blind, and vicious. Its teeth chattered, jaw snapping, as it crawled on limbs that appeared to be made of nothing but stretched bone.

It charged at Feng Xin, sensing life, blood and spiritual power. He'd been half expecting Hua Cheng to let it take a piece of him, just for fun, but the impact never came. Instead, Hua Cheng stood in front of him, holding the creature by its face as it struggled and screamed. Its skull turned to ash when Hua Cheng crushed it.

Seconds.

That was it. And it had nearly taken Mu Qing's life.

He flicks his hands to shake off the water before rising to his feet.

When he walks into the shrine, he makes it in time to see Xie Lian leaving the room where he had deposited Mu Qing's body earlier.

"I lent him some spiritual power to get him through and regenerate," Xie Lian says.

The sigh of relief Feng Xin lets out is an understatement. He feels a bit like throwing up.

"That's...great," he says. "Can I see him?"

He asks the question, but he doesn't wait for an answer. He steps forward, reaching for the door.

Xie Lian steps in front of him. He scratches the tip of his nose and awkwardly laughs. "Um... he's not ready for visitors."

Feng Xin frowns. "Visitors?" he parrots dumbly. Is that what he's considered?

"En, I lent him spiritual power, but he's still unconscious, and, well, you know Mu Qing. He's very... particular about appearances."

Feng Xin blinks. "I watched him face plant in the dirt earlier. I don't think you can get much worse." He goes to step around Xie Lian, but Xie Lian moves in his way again.

"Feng Xin," he starts, gingerly touching his neck. "He hasn't... hid the marks yet."

Feng Xin's brows shoot up. "So?"

Xie Lian looks like he would rather be anywhere else. "So... I think he wants them to stay hidden." Feng Xin's jaw drops.

"The fuck?!" he finally says, holding out his hands. "Why is everyone so obsessed with Mu Qing's marks all of a sudden? Who gives a shit? We all have them — I have fucking roses and hydrangeas all over my body. What are Mu Qing's going to be that it's such a big secret?! His soulmate is the one who's going to be covered in thorns because he's such a thorn in the side —"

The sound of someone slapping the table cuts off his rant.

Hua Cheng examines his nails from his place at the kitchen table. "The way you say that without a hint of irony — "

"— San Lang," Xie Lian interjects.

Hua Cheng sighs as he rests his chin on his hand. "Sorry, Gege," he says, with a pout. "It's just that I'm going to waste away. I had to use so much spiritual power to destroy that trash earlier. Maybe I need to borrow some from you too."

Xie Lian chuckles. "I'm sure that's not the case," he says, but he walks over anyway.

The door is left unattended. Feng Xin could walk through — he desperately wants to. He trusts Xie Lian, but he wants to see and touch because he needs to wipe out the image of Mu Qing lying lifeless on the ground.

Hua Cheng eyes him from the table as he folds Xie Lian into his arms. His dark eye glimmers, as if he's daring Feng Xin to take the gift of opportunity he's offered and open the door.

But a gift from a demon always comes with a price.

Don't look at my marks. Please.

"Fucking prick," Feng Xin mutters under his breath, but he's not sure if he's talking about Hua Cheng or Mu Qing. He turns away from Hua Cheng's mocking expression and starts to walk out the way he came.

"I'm going to finish rinsing off in the river. If he wakes up, come get me?"

Xie Lian nods from his place in Hua Cheng's arms. "Of course."

The stars look different from the mortal realm. They seem smaller, less attainable. It makes something twinge in Feng Xin's chest.

Vaguely, he remembers lying under them with Jian Lan on the rooftop and she would point out the different

constellations on warm summer nights. He can't remember many of them anymore. His memory is too faded, the information long buried, and he'd only been listening to the sound of her voice.

Things had been so different then, yet the stars remain the same.

He holds up his hand and looks at the marks that paint the back of it. Hundreds of years, and like the stars, these marks haven't changed.

He was thirteen when the first rose appeared on the inside of his wrist, its thorns and vines starting to creep up his forearm. Then more flowers formed as time stretched on, until, like most gods, his marks crawled along almost every inch of his body as a reminder of the love he traded for immortality.

But what was a soulmate? The chances of finding them were slim, many never did, and yet they were still happy.

Who was fate to dictate who you could or couldn't be with?

He sighs. He's not sure why he's thinking about it. Just because Mu Qing made it a personal mission to be ashamed didn't mean Feng Xin had to dredge up long discarded thoughts.

He sits up and eyes his outer robe, piled in a heap next to him. He'd given up trying to scrub the blood stains out of it and just looking at the fabric makes him want to hurl it into the river.

He's contemplating doing just that when there's a soft rustle in the grass next to him.

He turns and freezes.

Mu Qing sits beside him as if he's always been there, as if he didn't almost leave him.

"I'm not going to say, 'thank you," he says, without sparing Feng Xin a glance. "I don't thank fools."

Feng Xin can't process the words. He's too busy fighting the urge to reach out. He wants to touch, to make sure this isn't a dream or a hallucination or, worse, a ghost.

But Mu Qing sports a defiant and proud tilt to his jaw as his dark hair cascades down his back and hangs over his shoulder. His skin is pale in the moonlight, his expression cool and poised. He looks untouchable.

Feng Xin doesn't have it in him to retort.

All he sees when he blinks is Mu Qing disappearing over the edge of the lava pit, all he feels is how Mu Qing's blood made his hands slippery as he cut the armour from his shoulders.

He doesn't mean to, doesn't know when he moved, but the next thing he knows he's brushing Mu Qing's hair over his shoulder.

"What are you doing?" Mu Qing snaps, grabbing Feng Xin's wrist, stilling his hand.

Feng Xin blinks. It's a good question. What is he doing?

"Making sure you're not a ghost," he settles on.

Mu Qing wrinkles his nose. "Are you dumb? Would it even matter? It's not like we don't know ghosts," he says, but he doesn't release Feng Xin's wrist. Instead, he digs his fingertips in harder. His knuckles are white, and Feng Xin is starting to lose circulation in his hand.

He doesn't pull away.

He also doesn't say anything. His heart is hammering in his chest and it's the only thing he registers.

It would, he thinks in response to Mu Qing's question, if it meant you were going to disappear.

It would, if this was supposed to be goodbye.

Mu Qing's hair feels like silk as Feng Xin twists it around his finger, each individual strand distinct and real.

Not a ghost then.

He's not sure what his expression looks like, but it has Mu Qing narrowing his brows and slapping his hand away.

"The hell has gotten into you?" he asks, turning his attention straight ahead.

"You almost died — "

"And?"

"— and I wasn't allowed to see you."

Mu Qing stiffens. "So?"

"So, do you know how hard that was?"

Silence. That's the answer Feng Xin gets. It somehow spurs him on.

"Why won't you let me see your marks?" he asks.

Mu Qing clicks his tongue. "It's none of your business."

Feng Xin frowns. "Isn't it, though?"

What used to be individual puzzle pieces strewn across the table are starting to fit together, the picture revealing itself.

The way you say that without a hint of irony—

One well-timed comment and eight centuries of misconceptions unravel at the seams.

It makes sense if Feng Xin lets himself think about it; the reason why Feng Xin can't imagine his life without Mu Qing, the way they always come back together no matter how many times they push each other away.

But why spend over eight hundred years making sure that Feng Xin wouldn't ever find out?

I very much wanted to be your f-f-friend.

Feng Xin had always thought Mu Qing to be narcissistic, but Mu Qing had also earned a cursed shackle and had risked his life trying to save someone who he was convinced hated him. Truly, he was an enigma.

"It's not," Mu Qing reiterates, before he sighs and his shoulders fall. It's the first time he shows a hint of how exhausted he must be. "I'm tired, and I really don't feel like arguing with you, Feng Xin."

Mu Qing moves to get up but Feng Xin grabs his wrist. He is not letting him run away.

One, because where is Mu Qing going to go? Back to eating Xie Lian's cooking? That'll actually kill him. And two, if he doesn't say this now, he's not sure he ever will.

"You have sunflowers, don't you?" he says.

A beat passes. Mu Qing's lips part. He blinks.

Feng Xin turns Mu Qing's wrist over, and his robe slides down, revealing his forearm.

"Probably right here." Feng Xin taps the spot where his own first rose appeared. "And then you probably have violets all along here?" He touches the back of Mu Qing's hand.

Mu Qing's brows narrow, his lips pull back into a snarl as he wrenches his hand back.

"You're so stupid and don't know what you're talking about," he snaps, and his tone is vicious. It sinks its teeth in and tears. It hurts, but Feng Xin knows the bite is from a cornered animal trying to defend itself and survive.

"I looked," Feng Xin lies.

"You wouldn't," Mu Qing says with confidence like he knows Feng Xin through and through.

"You were dying," Feng Xin defends. "It was an accident."

"You're a terrible liar."

Feng Xin sighs in exasperation. "That doesn't mean I'm wrong. You also have gladioli under your left ribs." It's the same place Feng Xin has a stalk of lavender.

Mu Qing swallows, his eyes widen. Feng Xin has always gotten a kick out of rendering Mu Qing speechless. It's usually very satisfying and doesn't happen nearly enough, but this time is different. Mu Qing isn't looking at him in angry silence. Instead, his gaze burns into Feng Xin's. His grey eyes are frigid like ice that hasn't thawed off a mountain lake.

"I... I'm tired," Mu Qing reiterates. This time it's barely above a whisper. He moves to get up again, but Feng Xin is expecting it.

"Mu Qing," he says softly and it's the softest he's ever said the name before. "Stay."

It's one word, and he means it with every fiber of his being, but he's still trying to sort out what it means. Does he mean 'stay here'? Stay in his life? Stay by his side?

Maybe he should have thought this through better, done this when they weren't so raw. This doesn't feel like a win, at best it's a numb relief.

But he wouldn't take it back. Maybe that makes him selfish.

He reaches out again, and threads his fingers between Mu Qing's.

Eight hundred years at each other's throats, at each other's sides. They could've performed the ritual in the Xianle days to stop the marks from spreading. Things could have been so different... maybe.

Mu Qing stares at their hands, his expression almost impossible to read beyond the widening of his eyes. "Aren't you disappointed?" he finally says.

Feng Xin laughs, though it's closer to a bone tired huff. "That's a real fucked up thing to ask," he says.

Mu Qing rolls his eyes. "As if we aren't fucked up. You realize fate made a joke out of us. And you didn't answer the question."

Feng Xin grins. "No, I'm not." He squeezes Mu Qing's hand. "We'll figure it out."

Not tonight, or tomorrow. It might take them another century at the rate they go, but they have time.









## petals between these pages BYRAT WAR THE SERVICE STATE OF THE SERVICE

## Daily Professor He @professorhenews

there were flowers on his desk today?? who would send prof he flowers and how can we get in on it,,, asking for a friend

The vase is beautiful.

Medium-sized, celadon, and — if you looked close enough — its crackled blue-green glaze shone back at you. But what really catches the students' eyes, forget the vase, are the flowers spilling out of it.

They're a mishmash of things, stems tangled up in each other and clashing colors of petals trying to outshine the others as if it were a competition. But the bouquet is beautifully composed and the note tucked in its petals does not go unseen either.

Professor He had blushed — yes, *blushed* — when he unfolded the note. Only those with the tacit understanding that getting to world literature class early yielded a calm professor were privy to the way their teacher's cheeks tinged red.

Whispers jump from student to student, heads bunch together, and money passes through hands as the guesses build up — just *who* were they from?

"Nice flowers you got there, Prof." Pei Su, who had only taken the class for the credit but found himself enjoying it more than he'd like to admit, smirks. The implied question is not lost.

"Thank you," He Xuan responds.

...And that's all his students get on it. Their professor waves around the assigned reading and the topic is dropped.

Professor He is an enigma to both students and faculty at the university. He dresses like a student, yet has a refined, blunt way of speaking that sounds like he's lived through multiple lives.

He has five piercings, but Pei Su swears he's seen a sixth one outlined at the professor's belly button when he had come to class in a rather tight turtleneck.

However, as good-looking as their professor was, his students were convinced He Xuan was, hm, lacking in the love department.

"Professor He, did you get asked out a lot in school?"

It's undoubtedly a bold question, but one that had been at the back of many people's minds for a while.

His answer only further proved their suspicions. "What kind of a question is that?"

And then, "Do you ask all your professors this?"

The student had flushed, quietly shaking their head and the room was once again left to their musings.

He Xuan gave riveting lectures, could take apart novel scenes like he was picking out fishbones with chopsticks, and had students sighing when he rolled his sleeves up, yet they just could not imagine him being romantic.

He was a fucking book nerd for goodness sake — his love seemed to be directed more at people with syntax for brains than anything else.

"Hey, guys, what are we learning today?"

The students wave at the newcomer — late by their class' standards, but otherwise on time — and Shi Qingxuan practically skips inside with a sunny grin on his face.

To everyone's understanding, Shi Qingxuan is a student in some way or another. Everyone had grown used to seeing students of all ages around campus, so the class had welcomed him with open arms the day he sauntered into the lecture hall.

He teaches at the preschool down the road, evident from the stickers on his clothes and marker streaks on his arms. Shi Qingxuan is easily the number one gossip in the class (Pei Su a close second) and perhaps the only one unafraid of Professor He's cold gaze. He babbles about anything and everything, from what out of this world thing he'd heard from his preschoolers to his intensive yoga routine.

And while one might think his stories could get annoying, they somehow never do. Shi Qingxuan has this magical ability to grasp all the attention in the room and hold it in his finger-paint-stained hands.

"I don't know, I didn't do the homework." Pei Su mumbles, avoiding his professor's unwavering stare. But then, "Oh hey — you missed it though — the other day, Professor He had flowers on his desk."

"Did he, now?" Shi Qingxuan arches a brow, a faint smile curling on his face. "Who were they from?"

"That's the thing dude, no one knows." Pei Su shakes his head.

"Huh. Interesting," Shi Qingxuan muses.

Before he has a chance to say anything more on the topic, He Xuan enters. He looks as handsome as ever in his own emo-nerdy way, dressed in all black with wire-rimmed glasses perched on his nose.

"Alright so we're going to follow up on the topics we discussed last class. If I could have one person from each group share what they talked about."

Shi Qingxuan takes out his own notebook and pen, staring attentively up at the professor. While Shi Qingxuan's very pretty handwriting was identifiable to the whole class by now, everyone thought it was sort of comical at how much nonsense got scattered in his notes.

Pei Su had witnessed the preschool teacher doodle flowers in the margins as well as cheesily circle hearts around what seemed to be his initials and someone else's. On more than one occasion, Shi Qingxuan had been caught with his grocery list scrawled out instead of the required classwork.

"Wait, Professor," Pei Su sits up straight, abandoning his normal slouch, and Shi Qingxuan can tell he's about to throw the class entirely off-topic. "I wanna hear how *you* express love."

He Xuan stares blankly at Pei Su, as if the boy had just confessed to being a god. He opens his mouth, pauses, and surveys the room.

"Well. I mean —"

"Come on, Prof, we all wanna know!"

He Xuan sighs and pushes his well-worn glasses up his nose, before shifting to lean against his desk. "Don't think I don't know what you're doing."

"Go on, Professor, I'm curious too." A grin worms its way onto Shi Qingxuan's face.

Shooting the preschool teacher a withering glare, He Xuan begins. "I'm not good at expressing love."

"Oh come on!" Pei Su interrupts. "Any of us coulda guessed that."

"I could just carry on with the lesson."

"Sorry, sir."

He Xuan massages his temples before beginning again. He's unaware of the curious eyes trained on his every move, how the entire class seemed to have risen from their glazed-eyed stupor, and now have their complete attention on the enigma that is their literature professor.

"Love is messy. I hate it to be honest, or at least the foundation of it." The beginnings of a frown etch onto his face. "When the pining claws at your throat, forcibly closes it with its grip, and you think perhaps it would be better if you just... didn't. Or when you can feel exhaustion creeping up on you, crawling up your spine, because *god* why should you exert so much of yourself into something that you do not even deserve."

"And the worst of it — when you think you can settle for just being friends, because you would rather keep the painful closeness you have as friends than walk away as strangers who know everything about each other."

"But, Professor..."

He Xuan snaps out of his ramblings to stare at the forlorn faces of his students.

"It can't be all that bad, right?"

A small smile graces his features. He shakes his head. "No, it certainly isn't."

The students don't push for anything more and a silent understanding, that could perhaps be read as pity, settles over the room. Because despite their teasing and probing curiosity (that had now mutated into the form of a Twitter fan account), the students cared for their professor.

Even with a class size of forty, each student could assuredly say that Professor He had changed the course of their college career for the better. Whether it be the exact words of feedback needed to improve an essay or flourishing letters of recommendation they would argue secured internships, in his quiet ways Professor He cared for his students.

Naturally, they desired nothing less than the best for their professor — be it in romantic relationships or not. To some, perhaps his lack of a love life was a good thing. He Xuan was unparalleled! Unmatched! No one in their college bubble was deserving of their professor.

Then again, wouldn't a significant other be exactly what the professor might need? It was a real toss-up. A back and forth seesaw conversation that existed only in internal debates and the replies of Twitter dot com.

The next time that the students bring up Professor He's love life is only a week later. It is an admittedly more lighthearted conversation, sprung from Pei Su's latest sulking session.

"I just don't get it, guys." He buries his head into crossed arms, voice coming out muffled. "How can she be so dense?"

"Maybe you're the one who's not being straightforward enough," Shi Qingxuan points out, a stray lock curled around his finger. "When you asked her out, did you say it was a date?"

"Well I asked her to go see a movie with me," Pei Su mumbles.

"I'll ask one more time," Shi Qingxuan leans forward to tug Pei Su up from his self-imposed wallowing and lock their gazes. "Did. You. Say. It. Was. A. Date."

"No sir, I didn't," Pei Su stumbles over his words and, for a moment, the college class is reminded they have more than one teacher in the lecture hall.

"And there's your problem!" Shi Qingxuan smacks the table with a resounding whack, all traces of previous seriousness gone. "You have to be clear about these things."

"You got experience with this stuff, dude?" Pei Su shoots Shi Qingxuan an incredulous look.

Shi Qingxuan crosses his arms smugly, puffing up his chest like a bird whose feathers demanded to be ruffled. "I'm flattered you think I look young —"

"That was not what I was implying, but go on," Pei Su interrupts only to wince at another one of Shi Qingxuan's scathing glares.

"I have *plenty* of experience in the dating department."

"Ooh, do tell."

"I wasn't aware that Mr. Shi's dating life was the topic of class for today," He Xuan speaks from where he had been silently typing away at his desk.

"Sorry, Prof, curiosity got the better of me."

"Do go on, though," He Xuan nods in Shi Qingxuan's direction. "I am curious about this... experience myself."

With a smirk on his face, and the charm of a bard in a packed tavern, Shi Qingxuan begins. "So there was this guy in college, right?"

His eyes flit over the captivated expressions of the students. Shi Qingxuan laughs to himself — it seems that no matter the age, students will always love a good story.

"The hottest thing to walk the planet."

A collective groan rises from the students and Shi Qingxuan's shoulders shake from laughter. "Sorry, sorry, but it's true! We met at the gym and he was hauling his sexy ass out of the pool and I nearly *died*."

He lets himself cackle a moment longer before composing himself. "I digress. But I wanted him! And, I mean, y'all can probably tell but I'm the type of person who would make this known immediately. And I did — or, at least, I tried."

Shi Qingxuan sighs, "I did everything from increased skinship to pulling him out for dates and he still thought we were only friends! You wanna guess how long we played cat and mouse for?"

"A couple months?" One student pipes up.

"More."

"Half a year!"

"More." Shi Qingxuan turns to stare at He Xuan, a smugness twinkling in his eyes. "You wanna try and guess, Professor?"

He Xuan shakes his head in exasperation but caves. "Year and a half."

"Bingo!"

"A whole year and a half! Of me flirting and him being like 'oh, hehe, we're just friends."

"Maybe he was nervous," He Xuan supplies as the silence that floats through the room becomes just a tad unbearable.

"Nervous my ass, I made him go to couples yoga with me!" Shi Qingxuan huffs indignantly.

"Oh yes, there was that, wasn't there..." He Xuan mutters under his breath, just quiet enough for those in the front row to catch it.

"Anyways!" Shi Qingxuan claps his hands twice, carrying the same tone he probably uses to round up his preschoolers. "That's all over now and it worked out, so it's *fine*."

"Shi Qingxuan, you have a boyfriend?!"

"Nope!" Shi Qingxuan pops the 'p' with a grin so bright the students' brows knit in confusion — did he enjoy the single life that much?

But the following, "I have a *husband!*" causes jaws to hit the floor.

"You're married?!" Pei Su exclaims, speaking for the class.

"Mhmm," Shi Qingxuan nods as a sly smile makes its way onto his face. "Your professor is too."

"WwHAT?!" Their collective shout is so loud Shi Qingxuan has to shrink away, his smile only growing bigger.

He Xuan, on the other hand, looks worse for wear. He massages his temples and the frown that was etched onto his forehead darkens.

"To who?" Pei Su all but yells and Shi Qingxuan snickers at the vein threatening to burst on his neck.

"To whom," He Xuan corrects, then he shrugs, arms crossed as he sighs. "None of you ever asked. And I assumed you already knew."

Shi Qingxuan muffles his giggles behind a hand, "Sorry, I had to."

He Xuan shoots the preschool teacher one of his infamous glares, opening his mouth to reply.

"But who is it?" Pei Su asks. "Wait — don't tell me. We should guess ourselves."

He Xuan sighs, the ruffled hair on his head indicative of his declining resolve. "Go ahead."

"Hmm, is it the head of the literature department, Professor Ling Wen?" one of the students near the front muses. "You guys always seem to have engaging conversations."

"Yes, about literature," He Xuan shuts her down.

"What about Hua Cheng? He always complains about you during sculpture class," another chuckles.

He Xuan wrinkles his nose in distaste. "I don't even want to know what he says about me. And besides, doesn't he talk about his husband Xie Lian a lot more?"

"They're married?!" the student exclaims, and then, "He always talks about how you 'owe him' I don't know."

He Xuan shakes his head. "An old college thing. Nothing to concern yourselves with."

His response reveals nothing but there's a warmth in his tone that does not go unnoticed.

"I've got it!" Pei Su, who had been unusually quiet up until now, cuts off the conversation. "I bet it's the business professor, uhh, Professor Shi?"

Shi Qingxuan, who had gleefully been observing the back and forth between He Xuan and his students like a tennis match, coughs loudly.

He Xuan reacts a little more strongly. He turns away from the students to gag, waves of displeasure rolling off his shaking frame.

"How could you — I can't believe —"

They'd really done it. The students of Professor He's literature class had rendered their beloved professor speechless.

"What the fuck, *no*." He Xuan pinches the bridge of his nose, "I'd rather be married to Hua Cheng than Shi Wudu, thank you very much."

"My, aren't you being a bit dramatic, Professor?" Shi Qingxuan rests his chin on his hands, head tilted in catlike curiosity.

"Not. In. The. Slightest."

"Am I missing something?" Pei Su butts in yet again. "He's pretty handsome — and I'm sure the dude's loaded."

"Exactly," He Xuan bursts out. "That's the whole point, he's a conceited and pompous asshole."

"I wouldn't go that far," Shi Qingxuan mutters.

"Quiet, you," He Xuan shoots back.

"Hey, I hear enough of your complaints during dinner!" Shi Qingxuan's voice only grows louder.

He Xuan runs a hand through his hair for the umpteenth time. "Can we talk about this some other time?"

"No, I'm participating in this lovely conversation you're having with your students," Shi Qingxuan snarks.

"Please, love?"

"I'm sorry," Pei Su interrupts, bringing He Xuan and Shi Qingxuan back to the reality that they're currently in a college lecture hall. "Am I missing something?!"

"Oopsie." Shi Qingxuan taps his mouth with a hand as if to scold it for letting him get so heated. He looks to He Xuan with a crooked grin. "Come on, they deserve to know, it's fine."

"Are you sure?" He Xuan asks in a tone so soft, the students recoil in surprise.

And with only a single nod from Shi Qingxuan, He Xuan takes a deep breath, gesturing to the preschool teacher in the third row. "Everyone, this is my spouse, Shi Qingxuan."

"No way." Pei Su claps a hand over his mouth. "No fucking way. You two?!"

His head swivels back and forth between the two teachers. The rest of the class has similar reactions — eyes flitting between the two while others look shell shocked, all words stolen from their tongues.

"So the guy you were talking about earlier..." Pei Su falters as if he doesn't want to finish his question.

"Yup! Your dear professor." Shi Qingxuan winks, his pink tongue poking out of a smile.

"We don't need any more mental images from your university days," a student in the back hollers.

"Hey, you guys asked and I delivered!" Shi Qingxuan shrugs.

He Xuan's shoulders droop as he circles his desk to collapse into the comfort of his chair. "Are you all happy now?"

"Splendid, sir," Pei Su smiles. "I'm glad to know you're not living like a hermit who wallows in his own feelings."

"Who said he wasn't?" Shi Qingxuan giggles.

Energy drained, He Xuan casts one more tired glare at Shi Qingxuan. This one, however, the students can tell is different. There's a softness to it that curls around his features, only growing with the sunny smile Shi Qingxuan shoots back in return.

This, they suppose, is the missing piece of their professor's love life that had been under their noses the whole time. For only the one who could stir He Xuan's heart with a crook of a finger and exasperate him in such ways that his foul glare became a fond one, would send Professor He flowers.







# Gity of Flowers



When lives end, souls are said to pass onto Diyu, deep in the earth, where they idle and linger until they are to pass again into new life. Souls that pass onto Diyu are perfect and whole, filled with memories and bonds that come to be only in their deepest conscience, as they should be.

But there are also untethered souls on the surface, broken and warped, morbid and tragic, in their own kingdoms away from the living. Impossible plots of incomprehensible structures, as though all the chaos in existence has been condensed into these hotspots on the edge between the realm of ghosts and mortality.

The Ghost City is one such place, an endless street going from nowhere, leading to nowhere. Its bustling is eternal, for as long as those who loiter there remain in this plane. Vendors wave out of their stalls with grotesque limbs holding onto more grotesque limbs, signs droop from the shades illuminated by crimson lantern-light. There is yelling, beings offering bargains that are too good to be true — *cultivator repellants!* Anti-god tokens! We've got them all for just two pieces of copper! — there is whispering, accompanied by the flutter of dark lashes over empty eyes — *aren't you interested in a night of dreams?* — there is cajoling, with sharp teeth kept carefully tucked away from the mortals who've wandered too far — *you don't need a name to drink with us!* 

At the indistinct, uncertain, perhaps not truly there, end of the street, Hua Cheng's palace is quiet. It always is. The souls and ghouls and things flit in and out of his walls without so much a hiss. There is no weight to them, after all, no mortal entrapment that makes their clothes rustle or their breaths move dust.

Hua Cheng listens to the silence. In his expansive garden, the microcosmic musicality of nature sounds in its unfurling petals and drooping leaves, its crawling roots and creaking stems, its dancing and singing and *living* that he can only hear in the depths of his mind. He thinks, sometimes, often, that if he strains hard enough, sits long enough, waits patiently enough, he will be able to experience it, that ethereal scene of flowers against the sky.

Then he opens his eyes and looks at each of his thousands of flowers. And he thinks that none of them are *right*. Then the bell comes.

"My Lord," murmurs Yin Yu, who has his eyes respectfully averted from Hua Cheng's precious flowers, "there are tasks to be done."

With a whisper of his robes, Hua Cheng stands.

In his wake, and in all its beauty, Hua Cheng's garden is left with a lingering, mournful stillness.

Although referred to as the Ghost King, Hua Cheng does not actually govern ghosts, and spirits, and such. The dead do not do well with rules — to have died and then not-died to exist as they do, it is most likely that they have never done well with rules even in life — and Hua Cheng has little incentive to impose them. Rather, he sits upon his throne, built on the myth of his name and his person, and searches aimlessly for something none of his humble kingdom's ghouls can understand.

And yet, he has work to do, the droll responsibilities that come with being a ghost of influence.

Hua Cheng sits in his study, a small library filled wall-to-wall and floor-to-ceiling with scrolls and bound paper. His penmanship leaves much to be desired, but Yin Yu does not require him to write anything as much as he requires him to read and sign missives. These, of course, all come in all sorts of odd forms, seldom in paper.

Today, Hua Cheng has the unique pleasure of signing off on a scrap of human leather. That is the only highlight of his sunless day, and he continues reading uninteresting reports — of skirmishes, and sacrificial deals, and odd humans wandering into the Ghost Realm, and even odder gods being thrown out of the Heavens.

Sometimes, Hua Cheng would get requests, short notes written in hopeful tones, as though Hua Cheng was a god. Which he was very much not. Hua Cheng has killed gods, has raged upon their palaces and left the trails of crimson rain over the remains of what used to be their glory. This was long, long ago, when Hua Cheng was only just finding his way in the world, although he cannot for his life — ha — remember why.

In any case, Hua Cheng is not a god. Hua Cheng is also not capable of miracles, like these notes would suggest. So he doesn't sign these particular letters off and only keeps them in a box to look at on another day.

Sometimes, when something interesting is going on in the City, or in the world at large, Hua Cheng would roam, leaving his lavish manor for a glimpse of the changes time was molding. Sometimes, he would hear of a new species of flowering plant and scrawl an imperceptible notice for Yin Yu, then travel the lands for it.

However, he has, after all, spent far too long walking through the lands alone. Most often, he lingers in his city and his garden where there is nothing much else to do than work.

The days are dark, the nights empty.

Like all dead, he does not sleep. Nor does he dream. And yet, when he is bone-tired, he allows himself to lie down and shut his eyes, and search his mind for the vaguest wisps of color — of petals falling through the air, brushing their softness against his skin, and the tinkling of bells wrapping their notes around his chest.

And when he wakes up, so to speak, he reaches for a brush to fill yet another scroll with what nebulous image he remembers. Its contents barely differ with every iteration — always delicate brushwork of silken petals and pearlescent

ribbons, a pale imitation of what he occasionally thinks is a trick of his own mind.

Hua Cheng stands at the indistinct border between the Ghost City and the rest of the world.

It is rather important, Yin Yu had said, and so he went. But Hua Cheng partly wishes that he had stayed instead.

The mortal realm is in unrest. This is not actually a particular concern of Hua Cheng's; nonetheless, when this unrest bleeds into his domain and brings along with it a trio of seemingly hapless divinity with power confined in their mortal forms so great that they are nothing but suspicious, he unfortunately has a personal obligation to see to the matter.

At the head of the rather unnerving group is a disgraced god.

Most days, Hua Cheng is not interested in the affairs of lofty gods who think themselves so important that they build their palaces in the heavens and look down on their loyal subjects. He Xuan once said that they are all fools, blinded by their own greed and rewarded for it.

The disgraced god is different.

Hua Cheng sees through the disguise of his attendants immediately. But the disgraced god does not say a thing, so neither does he.

He is arrogant, as all gods are, back straight, chin elevated, a certainty to the set of his shoulders and passive strength in the relaxed curl of his fingers. He looks like he could be — must have been — a swordsman, but Hua Cheng can't sense a blade on him.

In its scabbard, E-Ming trembles.

Hua Cheng stills it with a thought and waits for the curious trio to approach him. He shoots each of the disguised gods a stern stare, then returns his focus to the disgraced one. He is of a height with Hua Cheng's chosen form, and when their eyes meet, Hua Cheng feels something sharp, yet not quite painful, go through his mind.

It makes him pause and listen to what this god has to say.

"People are dying," the disgraced god speaks, and stops there.

"As they do," says Hua Cheng slowly after a long moment of silence. In the span of what would be a heartbeat — if he had one at all, he thinks that sensation earlier must have been a trick of his own making.

The disgraced god wears a sheepish expression, saying, "Well, yes. I meant to say that they are dying...wrongly."

Dying wrongly? Hua Cheng doesn't know what to make of this. He could be said to have died *wrong*, to have been kept out of Diyu as a ghost. However — "That is unfortunate to hear. Regardless, this is not within the bounds of the domain of Crimson Rain Sought Flower."

The disgraced god presses on and elaborates, "The spirits who pass do not enter Diyu, but linger on the surface not quite as ghosts. They are still in possession of their memories."

Ah. Hua Cheng does not need Yin Yu to point out how, yes, this does fall within the bounds of his domain.

Still, there is not much Hua Cheng can do about it, for he is only a ghost.

He takes a long look at the disgraced god, observes as his pleasant features warp infinitesimally into something impatient, and recalls that strange not-quite-pain. He moves his hair over his shoulder and quirks his lips in the veneer of a polite smile. "You may speak to the citizens of Ghost City," he says simply, and then leads the queer group of a disgraced god and who Hua Cheng suspects are two martial gods into his domain.

The investigation does not take long. The no-name pubs closest to what may be the entrance to the Ghost City are the likeliest hotspots of lost souls, with or without their memories. Hua Cheng pays little attention to the startled look the gods spare his ghouls. It is easy to spot the newly dead amongst their grotesqueness.

Hua Cheng does not interfere in their questioning. But he does keep an eye and an ear on the gods, and so he witnesses the exact moment they speak to someone who doesn't belong in Hua Cheng's City only to gain more questions.

I'd died, said the soul with a name and a past, but I didn't know I did, until I realised that the only people who could hear me weren't people at all and that I couldn't sleep — couldn't dream.

"That isn't," the disgraced god's brow furrows, when they have reconvened away from the bustle of the night market that never waned, "that is not what death nor... undeath is supposed to be like."

No, Hua Cheng privately agrees. Hua Cheng has always known he was dead, longer than he has known that he was once alive.

"I suspect you shall find answers in Diyu," Hua Cheng finally says. His mind spins and spins with the words of the soul. His head aches.

The disgraced god stares at him for a second thoughtfully, then looks to his attendants. "To Diyu, then."

Their destination is less than one moon cycle away from Hua Cheng's City. Hua Cheng thinks of the towering scrolls in his study, the bustling of his realm, the hollowness of his garden — and then he thinks of the peculiar *knowing* he had felt upon meeting the disgraced god's gaze.

After a brief word with Yin Yu, Hua Cheng leaves the Ghost City and follows the disgraced god into the mortal realm.

The disgraced god's name is Xie Lian.

For a long moment, Hua Cheng is silent after Xie Lian tells him this. Most ghosts do not have true names carried over from their time as living beings, and it is rare for those who do to share them. Hua Cheng is naturally privy to his ghouls' existing true names given his position, but the easy way in which Xie Lian's is offered paints a stark contrast against the *Hua Cheng* he'd named himself and the *San Lang* he had offered in turn.

There is something unnerving about calling someone by their name, however, so Hua Cheng smiles and asks if he can just call him *gege*. To his surprise — and private glee — Xie Lian's eyes blow wide before he nods in easy acquiescence.

The familiar title has Xie Lian's two attendants bristling, and it is only a few more days of stumbling after more wrongly-dead souls and mutual ignorance of unspoken identities before Hua Cheng discovers that Xie Lian was once a prince. A true son of heaven, thrice over. *Gege* tastes better on his tongue than *dianxia* or anything similar, and Xie Lian doesn't seem to mind, lofty as he is, so Hua Cheng persists in calling him this.

It is a sense of familiarity that amplifies the peculiar sensation in Hua Cheng's mind, and Hua Cheng wants more.

He doesn't understand what it is exactly about this once-prince that makes him feel hollow, as though he can only be filled with scraps of his attention, of his story. Hua Cheng is a blank slate, a ghost of no origin and no home. But Xie Lian had these, and remembers them, and Hua Cheng wants so badly to know them for himself.

Still, there is much Xie Lian can teach him. He knows so much, Hua Cheng thinks, a little wistful, if he were to ask Xie Lian about the flowers he can neither see nor find, Xie Lian would know about them.

The entrance to Diyu closest to Hua Cheng's Ghost City is a well that reaches so deep into the ground that even his eye sees nothing but void. He peers into it for a moment, just to catch a glimpse of the impossible darkness, and tells Xie Lian, "Gege, I'll stay here."

Xie Lian looks at him, a slight furrow in his brow.

He explains, "I am forbidden from entering Diyu."

Xie Lian nods with dawning understanding, and calls his name, "San Lang."

"Gege," Hua Cheng obediently replies.

Xie Lian smiles beautifully, eyes crinkling with his pleasure. He stretches a hand out to rest upon Hua Cheng's face, thumb fitting just below his not-there eye. His touch is steady and warm and familiar — though this is only the first time they have touched — and Hua Cheng cannot help the way he leans into it. Xie Lian smells of the sun, and straw, and life. "Be good and wait for me."

He swallows down a sound. "Yes, gege."

Hua Cheng isn't certain of how long he waits there. But he is good, standing still until Xie Lian and his two shadows are catapulted back onto the surface, the scent of death dispersing from them as sunlight washes them aglow.

"You have your answers?" Hua Cheng asks. His voice is ever so slightly hoarse from his sustained silence.

Xie Lian peers at him from beneath his bamboo hat. Something swirls in his eyes that Hua Cheng cannot identify, but it's gone before he can blink. And Hua Cheng forgets it's ever there, because Xie Lian smiles at him. He barely even hears his reply, curious about why there's nostalgia woven into the curve of Xie Lian's lips.

There was no return journey filled with tales and pretty smiles to Hua Cheng's Ghost City. The matter of the souls dying wrongly is an urgent matter, and Xie Lian had even seemed reluctant, when he said that he was needed elsewhere immediately.

And so, Xie Lian is gone, off to meet with other gods in the Heavenly Court to discuss what he's learned in Diyu.

Meanwhile, Hua Cheng sits in his garden, drags his fingertips over his flowers' petals, and wonders what the hollow ache — the *longing* — in his soul is for.

He Xuan visits. He does this sometimes, when he wishes to escape the Heavenly Court or whatever it is he is doing.

He does nothing to aid Hua Cheng or his subjects, merely sitting in his city's pubs and restaurants and emptying them out of their stock and Hua Cheng of his coin. His accounts grow at a morbid rate with each meal, but He Xuan has never withheld his gluttony even before Hua Cheng.

Of course, his lavish spending is not overseen by Hua Cheng without due recompense. In this particular visit, He Xuan talks quietly about his sharp increase in distraught undead worshippers. He keeps his head down as he speaks, inky hair falling over the table. The smell of meat-blood cannot conceal the briny air he carries about him.

"It is easy to distinguish them," he says about the new worshippers, "there is a strange odor to them. Moreover... they pray for their soulmates, begging for protection if they yet live, for guidance if they do not."

Soulmates. Hua Cheng had, of course, heard this term before, but never from another ghost. So he sits in pointed silence until He Xuan elaborates with reluctance.

Every soul is born connected to its pair. But matters of the soul are not meant for mortals to comprehend, not truly, and so one can only meet their soulmate as they dream.

"And everyone has them?"

"Every human," He Xuan nods. Then, his blank gaze meets Hua Cheng's.

Hua Cheng does not need him to say it aloud. Soulmates come in dreams. But the dead do not dream.

"But," Hua Cheng says thoughtfully, "you remember."

He Xuan does not respond. That in itself, Hua Cheng knows, is an answer.

Xie Lian returns to Hua Cheng, but only for a moment. His presence is still required in the Heavenly Court, and Hua Cheng's spies deliver murmurs of a trial in the Upper Heavens. Hua Cheng takes advantage of this immediately, inviting Xie Lian into his garden.

Hua Cheng's head throbs at the sight of Xie Lian standing amongst his flowers, and threads of suspicion that have been spinning since his conversation with He Xuan hold fast in the web they have woven through his insides.

Hua Cheng commits the image to memory so that he may paint it later. His garden is beautiful, Hua Cheng is aware. His collection of flora is a point of pride, centuries in the making. They are the perfect backdrop to this once-prince. And yet all Xie Lian does is give it a brief once-over before he turns and reaches for Hua Cheng.

"San Lang," says Xie Lian, cradling Hua Cheng's face in the warmth of his roughened hands, "I have something to tell you when I return. Wait for me."

Hua Cheng feels as though he has spent his entire undead life, and his entire *life*, waiting. Still, he nods and responds to Xie Lian's demand with reverence and obedience and no hesitation, "Yes, gege."



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To our contributors: we couldn't have done this without you. Thank you for sharing your time and talent with us, and for making this project an absolute joy to work on. Your camaraderie and passion has been invaluable this last year.

To you reading this: we're so glad you picked the zine up as well. You're the reason we put this all together, and we hope you loved all that's contained here. Don't hesitate to look up our contributors on social media to support them in further endeavors!

With that, it's a wrap! Thank you to all involved, once again, and we wish everyone the best as they continue to create.

Sincerely, The Dawn of Spring Zine Mod Team

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